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Public Citizen * Nuclear Information and Resource Service * NAACP of Claiborne County, MS * Sierra Club of Mississippi

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Groups Condemn NRC Decision to Deny Racial Discrimination Appeal Over Mississippi Reactor

WASHINGTON, DC - Just one day after the country celebrated the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) on Tuesday rejected concerns over racial discrimination around a proposal to build a nuclear reactor in a poor Mississippi community of color.

The commission denied an appeal submitted by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) Claiborne County, Mississippi chapter, Nuclear Information and Resource Service (NIRS), Public Citizen and Sierra Club of Mississippi that showed how the proposed construction of additional reactors on the current Grand Gulf site in Port Gibson would result in racial discrimination. The application for an Early Site Permit, filed by Entergy, owner of Grand Gulf, would double the risk but provide no substantial benefit to a minority population already ill equipped to cope with the environmental and health consequences of a nuclear accident, sabotage or routine radioactive releases.

"NRC once again has bowed to its master - the nuclear industry - to pave the way for construction in an area where they expect the least resistance," said A.C. Garner, spokesperson for the NAACP Claiborne County Chapter. "This decision amounts to posting a 'WHITES ONLY' sign on the hearing room door," he added.

Claiborne County is 84% African American with 32.4% of the population living below the poverty line. In an unprecedented move, a predominately white state legislature passed a bill in 1986, a year after the reactor opened, to gradually reallocate up to 70% of the county tax assessment levied on Grand Gulf to 47 other Mississippi counties in Entergy's electrical distribution network. This left the economically deprived county to face nuclear catastrophe with a crumbling hospital that is not open 24 hours, inadequately equipped police force and washed-out, impassible reactor evacuation routes that it cannot afford to fix. In a dismissively worded decision, the NRC denied the petitioners' environmental justice contentions were litigable and stated, "our boards do not sit to 'flyspeck' environmental documents."

"The decision this week by a commission sitting in its ivory tower trivializes Dr. King's legacy," said Paul Gunter, director of the Reactor Watchdog Program at NIRS. "The decision shows that racial discrimination is alive and well in this country, and worse still in Mississippi, the cradle of the civil rights movement."

The NRC has recently changed its policy on environmental justice to make it unlikely that issues of racial discrimination, fairness and economic equity would be considered as a litigable issue in licensing proceedings.

"The NRC has callously dismissed the concerns of an already disenfranchised community," said Wenonah Hauter, director of Public Citizen's Energy Program. "This is the latest example of the agency's determination to promote nuclear profit over citizens' rights."