

SAFE USE OF NUCLEAR POWER IN OUTER SPACE

Since the Soviet Cosmos 954 crashed in northern Canada in 1978 scattering radioactive debris over parts of the Northwest Territories, Canada has been working actively for international acceptance of a set of legal principles to help protect the public from similar dangerous incidents.

Negotiations on safety principles governing the use of nuclear power sources in outer space began in 1979 in the U.N. Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (UNCOPUOS). After years of negotiations, the UNCOPOUS session in June 1992 adopted a Set of Principles Relevant to the Use of Nuclear Power Sources in Outer Space. For its part, the U.N. General Assembly, adopted these principles in resolution 47/68 of 14 December 1992.

In addition to placing limits on radiation, the principles include provisions on the publication of a safety assessment before launch, notification of re-entry, assistance to states and liability and compensation. The principles are not binding on states and are limited to existing nuclear power sources for on-board electrical systems, not for propulsion.

While the U.N. resolution provides that the principles should be reopened for revision by the UNCOPUOS no later than two years after their adoption, given the difficulties related to their negotiation, it is unlikely that proposals for revision will be put forward at this time.