

Committee to Bridge the Gap * Nuclear Information and Resource Service *Public Citizen

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NRC Votes Against Requiring Reactors to Be Protected From Air Attacks Or A Large Number of Attackers

Move Jeopardizes Safety of Millions, Public Interest Groups Say

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s (NRC) vote today against requiring existing nuclear power plants to be protected against 9/11-type terrorist attacks jeopardizes the safety of millions, three public interest organizations said. The new rule, which is supposed to lay out the extent to which operators must protect reactors from terrorist attacks, doesn’t require protection against attacks by airplanes, nor against more than a small number of attackers on the ground – a number that would represent a fraction of the 19 terrorists involved in 9/11.

The 9/11 Commission found that the plotters had considered targeting nuclear reactors. A successful terrorist attack on a nuclear plant could cause a devastating radioactive release.

“Rather than requiring measures to prevent a plane crash from damaging vulnerable parts of a nuclear plant, which would be the smartest course, the government is relying on post-crash measures and evacuation plans to attempt to ‘mitigate’ the public’s exposure to radiation,” said Michele Boyd, legislative director of Public Citizen’s Energy Program. “Fire prevention is always better than fire fighting. Nuclear terrorism prevention is far more prudent than trying to reduce radiation exposures after the fact.”

On Friday, Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, wrote to the NRC that “the communities that surround existing plants need to be confident that the NRC, as the regulator charged with nuclear safety, did all it could to ensure that plants defend against current security threats. In particular, communities should be assured that the plants are prepared to defend against large attacking forces and commercial aircraft.”

Failing to address these issues, Boxer wrote, would be at odds with the intent of Congress in passing the Energy Policy Act of 2005. Commissioners will be required to explain their actions when they next appear before her committee, she said.

The Energy Policy Act of 2005 directed the NRC to undertake a rulemaking to revise its “Design Basis Threat” – regulations defining the terrorist threat against which reactor operators must be prepared to protect. Congress specified that the rulemaking must consider the events of 9/11, attacks by multiple coordinated teams of a large number of attackers, attacks from the air, and the use of explosives of considerable size and other modern weaponry, among a number of other factors.

“Rather than upgrading protections, the proposed rule merely codifies the status quo, reaffirming the existing, woefully inadequate security measures already in place at the nation’s reactors,” said Daniel Hirsch, president of the Committee to Bridge the Gap.

In September 2004, the Committee to Bridge the Gap filed a petition for rulemaking requesting that existing nuclear plants be required to construct “Beamhenge” shields – consisting of steel I-beams and cabling – around sensitive parts of the facilities so an incoming plane would hit the shield, and not the reactor, spent fuel pool or other critical targets. Despite receiving more than 800 comments in support of the petition (including by eight state attorneys general) and almost none in opposition, the NRC rejected the proposal. It asserted that it saw no need to protect reactors against air attack because “mitigation” measures and evacuation plans for surrounding areas to lessen public radiation exposures could be activated after a plane crash that results in the release of radioactivity.

“We are shocked that the NRC would even consider disregarding aircraft attacks on existing reactors with so many operable airfields within 10 miles of most nuclear power stations,” said Paul Gunter, director of the Reactor Watchdog Project for the Nuclear Information and Resource Service. “Given that it is impossible to react to a fast-breaking event such as a local private plane laden with explosives, structural defenses against aircraft attack must be inserted into regulations – if not by NRC, then by Congress.”

The NRC also rejected any requirement to protect against attacks by groups of terrorists comparable in size to the four teams totaling 19 people that were involved in the 9/11 attacks. Instead, NRC staff argued that 9/11 should be considered four separate, individual attacks involving only the number of terrorists in a single plane.

“Protecting reactors from a small fraction of the number of terrorists involved in 9/11 is irresponsible in the extreme,” said Hirsch. “Have we learned nothing from that horrible event?”

The NRC rulemaking was initiated in part in response to a 2004 lawsuit by Public Citizen that challenged NRC’s existing security requirements, which were adopted behind closed-doors with the nuclear industry and without public participation.

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Note: A two-minute animation of the vulnerability of reactors to air attack, and how to protect them, narrated by Martin Sheen, can be viewed by going to <http://www.committeetobridgethegap.org>. Stills for print reporters and broadcast-quality QuickTime video file for TV can be made available electronically upon request.