

Congress Holds Closed Hearing On Nuclear Plant Security

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NEW YORK -(Dow Jones)- At a closed congressional hearing on nuclear plant security this week, representatives of the nuclear industry, federal agencies and a nuclear watchdog group called for a greater federal role in nuclear plant security.

Panelists expressed skepticism over a Senate bill to federalize security at over a hundred commercially-owned nuclear reactors and asked lawmakers to draw a line between private and public responsibility for protecting sites from attacks of the scale seen on Sept. 11. To that end, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission - the federal agency that oversees nuclear facilities, and the Nuclear Energy Institute - and industry group - said they are conducting a "top-to-bottom" review of how nuclear plants fit into the nation's security infrastructure and the kinds of threats plants can defend against.

Currently, highly-trained paramilitary forces employed by reactor owners are required to fend off a commando-style attack, based on certain threats - known as the "design basis threat."

But the attacks on New York City and the Pentagon, considered military attacks, have set a new security threshold.

Lawmakers are under intense pressure to step up protection of nuclear facilities and the people who live around them to meet the new standard.

"In the weeks since Sept. 11, it has become clear that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission must reevaluate its current design-basis threat, and decide how to incorporate potential terrorist threats that we had not previously considered," said Rep. James Greenwood, R-Pa., who chaired the meeting.

Greenwood heads the House Energy and Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation, which oversees the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The issue of who should be responsible for plant security came to a head last week when senators Harry Reid, D-Nev., Hillary Rodham Clinton, D.-N.Y., and Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., called for the NRC to take over plant security from the private security forces currently employed by reactor owners.

But according to testimony released after the hearing, all panelists agreed that handing security over to the NRC was a bad idea.

Echoing the view of the nuclear power industry, NRC Chairman Richard A. Meserve said the bill addressed a "nonexistent problem," since plants already employ highly-trained guards.

He said the bill would pre-empt the security review the NRC is conducting with reactor owners and would undermine the agency's regulatory function by creating "command and control" problems.

The nuclear industry is eager to clarify who has responsibility for protecting against the new threat. More security at nuclear reactors and sites that house radioactive spent fuel means higher operating costs for utilities - something the industry wants to avoid if nuclear power is to remain competitive with other energy sources.

"The industry continues to maintain its commitment to preventing ground-based threats," said Ralph Beedle, chief nuclear officer at the NEI. "It is essential that the federal government recognize its responsibility to protect the public against enemies of the state."

While the nuclear community continues to spar over whether a reactor's containment structure can withstand an airliner crash, a greater role for the military seems inevitable, said Paul Leventhal, executive director of the Nuclear Control Institute, a nuclear nonproliferation group.

Leventhal proposed that troops be stationed around reactors and spent fuel sites and asked that Congress consider installing antiaircraft protection at reactor sites as a last resort against attack.

"You could bring to acceptable levels the risk of a successful attack and virtually eliminate the vulnerability," he said. "In the absence of this protection, these plants remain vulnerable."

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