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Since Sept. 11, safety of nuclear plants is inflaming emotions  
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WASHINGTON - A short while ago, the nuclear industry enjoyed a friendly Congress and the backing of Americans for building the first new atomic power plants in a generation.

In heady moments that had been rare for his industry, a lobbyist last summer likened nuclear power's turnaround to the story of Cinderella. In May, the Gallup Organization reported that most Americans favored additional nuclear power.

But like the clock striking midnight, the Sept. 11 attacks have interrupted nuclear power's turnaround. An industry that was enjoying resurgence after two decades of perception problems is being held out as a drain on public finances and a symbol of homeland vulnerability.

Rather than supporting the industry's revival, Congress has sounded more like the fairy tale's cruel stepsisters in demanding security makeovers and aggressively questioning nuclear plants' readiness to repel terrorist attacks.

Boisterous hearings are breaking out in communities where plants are situated. In Brattleboro, Vt., a town of 12,000, more than 600 showed up last week to question safety at the Vermont Yankee plant and the storage of spent fuel there.

A Gallup Poll in November showed that survey numbers had flipped: By 52 percent to 42 percent, Americans opposed nuclear expansion.

Last week, the National Governors Association reported that by the end of the year, states will have paid \$58 million for security at the nation's 103 nuclear reactors since Sept. 11. That is higher than the cost of security at dams and bridges (\$46 million), coal-fired plants and gas pipelines (\$28 million) and water and sewer plants (\$11 million).

"If we have to turn these reactors into impregnable fortresses to withstand kamikaze attacks, it begs the question of whether it's worth it," asserted Robert Alvarez, a former Energy Department official who is executive director of the New York-based STAR Foundation, which is critical of nuclear power.

Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., another critic, contended that nuclear power has been falling out favor because using it to produce energy costs more using than coal and natural gas.

The events of Sept. 11, he said, "represent an additional complicating factor that utility executives will need to take into account" before they considering building more nuclear plants.

Nuclear power officials acknowledge their setback but insist that it will be temporary and pose no lasting obstacle to their industry. They argue that nuclear power produces energy without the types of air pollutants that are

Senate Assistant Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., right, announces introduction of legislation to increase security at nuclear power plants during a news conference in November.  
(Dennis Cook/AP)

fueling growing concerns about global warming.

"We need to get through the current post-Sept. 11 situation both in terms of the security and the attacks from the anti-nuclear people and their friends in Congress," said Marvin Fertel, a vice president of the Nuclear Energy Institute in Washington. "That may take a little while."

In Illinois, the Exelon Corp., which operates the Clinton Nuclear Power Station and a total of 11 reactors now generating power, says it still plans to proceed late next year in picking a site for a new nuclear facility. With a total of 17 reactors in three states, Exelon is the nation's biggest nuclear operator.

The company has given no clue as to whether it might seek to build in Illinois or elsewhere. Critics in Illinois have speculated that Clinton would be an appealing choice because of the relatively sparse population in central Illinois.

No matter where Exelon attempts to build, spokeswoman Ann Mary Carley said that the Sept. 11 fallout could make her company's task more challenging.

"If you look at it from public perception, I'm sure there will be more work involved in trying to explain it," she said.

### **Stockpiling pills**

A bioterrorism bill introduced last week by the House Energy and Commerce Committee calls for stockpiles of potassium iodide pills that would be distributed to people within 50 miles of a nuclear plant in the event of a radiation release.

Potassium iodide protects the thyroid, a gland that helps to regulate the body's growth and is particularly sensitive to radiation.

A willingness by a Republican-run committee to acknowledge such ominous threats is a measure of new congressional concern, often from members who paid little attention to nuclear power in the past.

At a closed hearing of the Energy and Commerce oversight subcommittee last week, members grilled the chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Richard Meserve, about the security standards for the mothballed plants where spent fuel from reactors remains stored, according to sources.

Rarely before now had members of Congress concerned themselves either with plants being decommissioned or with the used but still highly radioactive fuel rods that have been removed from the reactor cores.

Congress started getting cranky when the Nuclear Regulatory Commission changed its assessment about the threat to nuclear plants from terrorists turning jetliners into missiles. Just after Sept. 11, the commission said that plants could withstand the impact of commandeered aircraft.

Later, the commission said it was possible that such a crash would cause damage "that would result in the release of radiation."

Senate Majority Whip Harry Reid, D-Nev., is among sponsors of a wide-ranging new bill that would toughen the security standards for defending against an array of assaults on plants and would federalize the security guards who work there.

"If they can fly planes into the World Trade Center, they can mount attacks on nuclear power plants," Reid said.

As it stands, a nuclear plant has to demonstrate a capacity to repel what is known in the industry as a "three and one attack" - three well-trained and heavily armed terrorists with one person inside the plant providing assistance.

Reid's bill would require plants to be able to defend against attacks by multiple large teams being assisted by several people inside. Plants also would need to demonstrate the ability to repel attacks from the air and water.

The legislation has drawn opposition both from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the nuclear industry.

In a letter to Reid on Nov. 28, Meserve, the commission chairman, protested what he said would be "radical change" from present practice. Meserve said it was unfair for Congress to separate nuclear plants from chemical plants, oil



