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Nuclear facilities' vulnerability makes more Americans nervous

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By The Associated Press

BRATTLEBORO, Vt. -- Diana Sidebotham attended her first public hearing as a critic of nuclear power when the Vermont Yankee plant's license application was pending in 1971.

Some 30 years and scores of such forums later, Sidebotham went to yet another one last week at a Brattleboro high school and encountered the biggest crowd she had ever seen at such an event -- more than 500 people.

Worries about nuclear power -- in particular, fears of a terrorist attack on a plant -- have taken on new urgency since Sept. 11.

"Now that a major disaster has occurred, people are beginning to understand that we are vulnerable," Sidebotham said.

The new fear is that terrorists will crash a jetliner into a nuclear plant, scattering radiation in a Chernobyl-like disaster.

Around the country since Sept. 11:

-- The Federal Aviation Administration ordered no-fly zones around the nation's nuclear plants for two weeks in October. When a student pilot flew a small plane into airspace near a former nuclear plant in Colorado, two F-16s were scrambled and escorted the aircraft to a landing.

-- National Guardsmen were posted in recent weeks at nuclear plants in several states, and many installations have added private security guards.

-- Governors are clamoring for the federal government to open a long-delayed high-level waste-disposal site and take spent fuel now stored in pools considered more vulnerable to attacks than the reactors themselves.

-- Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton is co-sponsoring legislation that would make nuclear plant security a federal responsibility.

-- A panel that advises Connecticut Gov. John G. Rowland recommended the nation consider arming nuclear plants with air defense systems.

-- Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, a doctor, reversed his earlier position and said he wants the state to stockpile potassium iodide, a drug that can protect against one form of radiation.

Defenders of nuclear power have given assurances about security at the nation's 103 reactors.

"There has been no credible threat against any nuclear facility in this country, and if there was, we would be equipped to deal with it," Nils Diaz, a member of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said last month in Florida.

A 1982 Argonne National Laboratory study said it would be possible for a large jetliner to breach a reactor containment vessel and spread radiation. There are also fears that a jet hitting the open-topped pools of highly radioactive waste could also cause a major release of radiation.

At last week's meeting in Brattleboro, Hubert Miller, an NRC regional administrator, said nuclear plants were not designed with an attack by a large passenger jet in mind. But he said the containment vessels that surround reactors are among the strongest buildings in the country.

He repeatedly told the crowd that security at Vermont Yankee is "robust."

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