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DOMESTIC SECURITY

Nuclear Sites Ill-Prepared for Attacks, Group Says

By MATTHEW L. WALD

ASHINGTON, Dec. 16 — The security drills created by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to ensure that reactor security guards can repel terrorists involve mock attacks by only three intruders, assisted by one confederate inside the plant, according to a nuclear safety group.

Even against such limited challenges, crews at nearly half the reactors have scored poorly on the drills, according to documents assembled by the group, the Committee to Bridge the Gap, based in California.

In an article in the January issue of The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (www.thebulletin), Daniel Hirsch, the president of Bridge the Gap, contends that the drills are unrealistic, especially in light of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, which involved 19 hijackers operating in four well-coordinated teams.

"The N.R.C. and the industry seem to be stuck in a time warp of a quarter of a century ago, and are simply hoping that the problem goes away," Mr. Hirsch said. He called for upgrading the level of assumed threat that is the basis for designing protections of nuclear power plants.

Federal regulations call for plants to be prepared to deal with "a determined violent external assault, attack by stealth or deceptive actions of several persons." The attackers are to be assumed to have light weapons, a four-wheel-drive vehicle and help from a knowledgeable accomplice in the plant.

But the regulations do not call for protections against attackers with aircraft or boats, even though many plants are on lakes, rivers or seashores or are in zones where flying is not tightly restricted.

The regulations require a minimum of five guards on duty at plants — enough to outnumber the attackers, by their calculations. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission's documents call this a matter of "conservatism," and the agency has said that the threat of a larger attack is "not credible."

Commission officials have said that the meaning of "several" attackers in their regulations is secret, but a 1976 policy paper identifies it as three. The number was made public in a 1982 decision about licensing the Pacific Gas and Electric Company's Diablo Canyon reactors.

At the regulatory commission, William M. Beecher, the director of public affairs, said he could not confirm that the number was three. "We cannot discuss safeguards information," Mr. Beecher said. "Regardless of what's in the public record, I can't break security."

In 1977, the regulatory commission found that "on the basis of intelligence and other relevant information available to the N.R.C., there are no known groups in this country having the combination of motivation, skill and resources to attack either a fuel facility or a nuclear power reactor." At the time, the agency said it would review the issue in the future.

Mr. Hirsch said the current regulations were obsolete long before Sept. 11. He cited an attack planned by the radical environmental group Earth First in 1986 against the three- reactor Palo Verde nuclear complex, in Arizona. The group tried to cut power lines leading to the plant. Had it succeeded, instruments controlling the reactors could have lost power.

Mr. Hirsch's group has tried repeatedly to get the commission to toughen its security standards. The agency did tighten its rule setting safeguards against truck bombs in 1993. That was a reaction to the terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center's parking garage and an incident in which a former mental patient sped past the guard shack at the Three Mile Island reactor in Pennsylvania and crashed his station wagon into the plant.

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Mr. Hirsch said the commission had taken its action extremely late, ignoring a previous series of huge truck bomb attacks abroad.

But Mr. Beecher said that the commission was conducting a "top to bottom review" of security and that many states had called out state troopers or the National Guard to help secure the reactors.

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