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Nuclear fears to be forum topic

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission chief hopes to allay fears about terrorists and the Florida Power plant.

By ALEX LEARY, Times Staff Writer
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CRYSTAL RIVER -- The head of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission will be in town next month to address concerns about terrorism and the safety of Florida Power's nuclear plant.

The town-meeting forum with Nils Diaz, a former University of Florida professor, has been scheduled for Jan. 17 at Crystal River City Hall, 123 NW U.S. 19.

Mayor Ron Kitchen, who announced the meeting Monday, said the commissioner wants to allay fears about the threat to the nuclear plant, which has been on high alert since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

In an telephone interview from his St. Petersburg home, Diaz said he would visit several power plants in the coming weeks.

Diaz, who spent 30 years in Gainesville, said he had a particular interest in Crystal River because he has lived nearby for most of his life.

"I think I might be able to help residents feel better about where they live and what the federal government is capable of and what we have done to ensure that public safety is protected."

Nuclear plants, he said, are hardened facilities with "multiple layers" of defense against an accident. He raised doubts about whether a rogue plane could damage the reactor containment building and said even if it did, safety backups could help prevent the release of radioactive material.

Diaz said he was concerned that the impact of a nuclear accident stemming from terrorism was overstated in a November article in the St. Petersburg Times.

The report, which laid out a worst-case scenario involving severe structural damage, the melting of uranium fuel and failure of all safety systems, cited a 1982 study commissioned by the NRC in which Crystal River was named.

Conducted by Sandia National Laboratories, the study estimated that a nuclear catastrophe in Crystal River could cause 1,160 cancer deaths within one year of exposure, 6,630 injuries and \$53-billion in damage, according to the Washington Post.

The estimates for the nation's nuclear sites far exceeded previous worst-case scenarios acknowledged by the NRC and set off a debate about the methodology of the computer model used, CRAC2.

Diaz noted the age of the study, but conceded that the investigation has not been replicated. He said the study was to determine whether power plants should be built

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near major airports and was not a comprehensive look at the health effects. "It might not be true," he said.

He said the government has updated information on the threat to public safety but said he would wait until the Jan. 17 forum to elaborate, in part because he was leaving for Miami on Monday afternoon.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, the NRC has urged the nation's 103 nuclear reactors to be on high security alert.

Florida Power has added additional security guards at its Crystal River energy complex and installed concrete barriers. The Coast Guard recently established no-trespassing zones in the coastal waters near the plant.

The company drew some criticism when it rejected help from the National Guard, but officials said the measures already in place were adequate.

Next month's meeting is not the first time Diaz has publicly addressed nuclear terrorism. During a talk at the University of Florida on Nov. 17, he said nuclear plants are better secured than any industrial facility. Fears about radiation and cancer, he told the audience, have been hyped.

Some nuclear watchdog groups have been critical of the NRC's actions in recent weeks, suggesting it is too close to the industry.

"They are going into full battle mode," said Tyson Slocum, research director for Public Citizen, a group that is critical of the nuclear industry.

"The NRC all along has been a pretty open advocate of nuclear power, which is kind of an unusual position for a regulatory body to have."

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