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Editorial: Beef up security at nuke plants

Questions about the safety of nuclear power plants have increased since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. In mock terrorist attacks, which were conducted prior to the destruction of the World Trade Center, security guards at nuclear power plants failed to adequately defend the plants about half the time -- an appalling failure rate. Now a nuclear safety group has collected information that shows the mock attacks themselves aren't as realistic and difficult as they should be.

The New York Times reported Monday that, based on information collected by the California-based Committee to Bridge the Gap, these mock terrorist attacks involve just three intruders and one insider at the plant. In contrast, the Sept. 11 terrorist hijackings involved 19 terrorists who operated in four disciplined teams. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission's regulations require a minimum of five guards at the nuclear power plants, a figure that the commission believes is enough to overwhelm attackers. The NRC believes that the threat of an attack involving a larger number of people is "not credible." But Sept. 11 obviously has turned upside down the NRC's concept of what is "credible."

The Times also reports that the NRC regulations that establish the parameters for the mock attacks are shortsighted in another way. The regulations say that the attackers would have light weapons, a four-wheel drive vehicle and assistance from an insider at the plant. But the scenario doesn't account for protection against attacks by air or by water. That is disturbing because many of the nuclear power plants are located in unrestricted air space and by oceans and rivers.

Members of Congress understandably have grown concerned, and last month some of them sponsored legislation that would require beefed-up security at the power plants, including a more realistic assessment of the potential terrorism threats. The legislation, introduced by Sens. Harry Reid, D-Nev., the majority whip, and Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., and James Jeffords, I-Vt., also would federalize the security workers at nuclear power plants, much as was done with airport security personnel.

Nuclear power plant operators will scrimp on safety if they can get away with it, just like the airline industry had done for years. But this situation can't be allowed to continue. Congress should pass legislation that places a premium on protecting nuclear power plants so that nearby residents aren't placed in harm's way.

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