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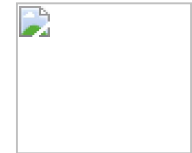
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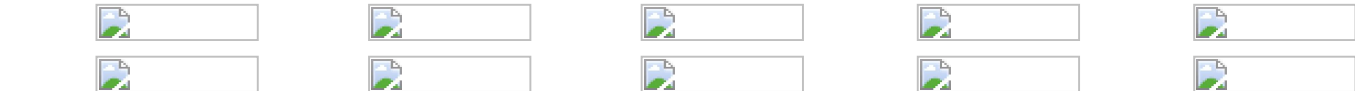
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NRC Chief Criticizes Guard Proposal

The Associated Press, Thu 17 Jan 2002

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federalizing guard forces at nuclear power plants as some senators have proposed would create new problems and not increase security, the chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission said Thursday.

NRC Chairman Richard Meserve said the commission strongly opposes legislation introduced in the Senate that would replace private security forces at nuclear power plants with federal guards.

“We don't see that there is a problem” with the current guards. “These are people that take their jobs very seriously,” said Meserve when asked about the legislation after a luncheon speech at the National Press Club.

The nuclear industry contends a federal force would weaken security, not strengthen it, and has urged Congress instead to give guards wider authority, including a green light to use deadly force when necessary.

The more than 5,000 security guards who protect the 103 nuclear power reactors in 31 states — many of them former military or police officers — currently are armed, but many states restrict what weapons they may carry and whether they may use deadly force.

Federalizing guard forces could create a conflict, Meserve said, since the NRC might be required to become a security agency at the same time as it regulates the plants and their security operations.

“We don't see the current system creating a problem,” he said.

In his remarks, Meserve said the nuclear industry has been on high alert since Sept. 11, but “there have been no specific, credible threats of a terrorist attack on nuclear power plants.”

“The physical protection at nuclear power plants is very strong,” said Meserve, and plant employees must pass background checks, an FBI check and psychological testing.

But after the speech, Meserve, acknowledged that prior to Sept. 11, nuclear reactor operators frequently gave newly hired workers free access to power plants before all the security clearances — particularly criminal background checks — had been completed.

“This is the kind of issue we're examining very closely now,” he said in a discussion with reporters.

The NRC tightened the requirements after Sept. 11, he said, and told operators to keep employees out of vital areas of a plant and require them to have an escort until all background checks are finished — including the FBI security check, which usually takes the longest.

The legislation to federalize security guards at nuclear power plants was introduced by Democratic Sens. Harry Reid of Nevada, Joe Lieberman of Connecticut and Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York and independent Sen. James Jeffords of Vermont, chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee that has jurisdiction over the NRC.

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