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NUCLEAR POWER FACILITIES: Beefing up plant security dismissed

NRC doesn't want to post federal guards

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WASHINGTON -- The chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission on Thursday dismissed the idea of posting federal guards at nuclear power plants, a key element in legislation being pushed by Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev.

NRC chief Richard Meserve said private security agents now guarding power plants are experienced, well-trained and well-paid.

"We don't see that as a problem," Meserve said. "The private guards in place are not rent-a-cops, they're not the kind of forces we are familiar with that existed in the past at airports. These are people who take their jobs very seriously."

Additionally, Meserve said the NRC would find itself with conflicts of interest if it were to manage government security at the same plants it is required to regulate for health and safety. About 5,000 guards are employed by utilities to provide security at 103 plants in 31 states.

"The NRC very strenuously opposes this legislation," Meserve said following a speech he delivered at the National Press Club.

Meserve had outlined his opposition to Reid in a Nov. 28 letter to the senator, who chairs the Senate's nuclear regulation subcommittee.

Reid and four other lawmakers introduced the bill on Nov. 29. It directs the NRC to tighten protections at nuclear power generators, spent fuel pools and onsite nuclear waste containers.

Besides federalizing nuclear plant security, the bill also requires the NRC to revise its "design basis threat," the terrorist scenario that utilities are required to protect against.

Meserve said Thursday the agency already is working on that matter along with other security improvements.

Reid on Thursday declined to comment on Meserve's remarks. Spokeswoman Tessa Hafen said he still plans to pursue his bill through hearings this spring. Others sponsors include Sens. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., James Jeffords, I-Vt., and Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass.

The lawmakers said they believed security needs to be strengthened at nuclear plants, which were identified as possible terrorist targets in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Reid had asked the NRC to supply him information about security guards at nuclear plants, but the agency replied it could not provide demographic data because it does not require licensees to submit that information, Hafen said.

Meserve said in his speech there has been "no credible terrorist threat" against a nuclear plant since Sept. 11, and "physical protection at nuclear power plants is very strong." However, the plants remain at high alert.

Meserve said he favors legislation that would authorize existing guards at nuclear plants to use deadly force to repel attackers. Guards presently are armed but some states restrict what guns they can carry and how they can be used.

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