

# US regulators oppose federal guards at nuke plants

By Chris Baltimore

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A Congressional proposal to place guards at the nation's 103 nuclear power plants under federal control is unnecessary because the facilities already have enough security in place, the chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission said Thursday.

Democrats in the House and Senate have introduced bills which would require the NRC to take the lead in providing security at nuclear plants, a task now left to the private firms that operate them.

The proposal has gained momentum from some lawmakers who also favored federalizing security at the nation's airports, one of the many changes proposed after the deadly Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in Washington and New York.

The NRC "strenuously opposes the legislation," to federalize nuclear security workers, said agency Chairman Richard Meserve, speaking at a National Press Club lunch. "We don't see that there is a problem today" with the current nuclear guard regimen, he said.

Senate Democrats Harry Reid of Nevada, Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and Hillary Clinton of New York are sponsoring the Senate version of the bill.

In the House, it is championed by Massachusetts Democrat Edward Markey, a long-time critic of current nuclear plant safety.

Private nuclear guards are "not rent-a-cops," Meserve said, pointing to higher pay, experience and retention than their airport counterparts.

Enacting Congress' scheme would make the NRC "a security agency much more than a regulatory agency. I believe that would be a deflection of our mission," he said.

The Nuclear Energy Institute, the industry's lobbying arm, also opposes federalizing plant guards. The trade group said the proposal would require hiring 5,000 more guards.

That would make NRC "one of the largest law enforcement/security agencies in the country," bigger than the Secret Service or Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the industry group contends.

Meserve sought to reassure the public about the safety of nuclear plants, but gave no details of NRC's ongoing "top-to-bottom review" of agency security practices.

"Let me assure you that nuclear power plants are not soft targets," Meserve said, calling them "among the most formidable structures in existence."

The NRC has been scrambling to assess whether U.S. nuclear power plants could withstand the crash of a large airliner, such as the ones hijacked for the Sept. 11 attacks. Nuclear power reactors are typically enclosed in concrete walls of up to 4.5 feet (1.35 meters) thick.

The agency's so-called "design basis threat" -- the minimum preparedness level required at each plant -- does not protect against a direct hit from an aircraft, he said.

Meserve gave no indication of when NRC would complete its threat evaluation.

"I don't think there will be any magic end-date for this," he said, pointing to inter-agency cooperation with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the White House's new Homeland Security office, and other agencies.

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