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The Nuclear Control Institute says military forces and anti-aircraft weapons should be poised to protect the nation's nuclear plants. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission put the plants on heightened alert following Sept. 11, including more guards and physical barriers, but has not asked for military intervention.

"The government at this point appears to be taking a hands-off policy toward protection of the plants," Leventhal told an audience of about 150 people. "Perhaps nothing less than an Osama-gram will stir the NRC to action."

Nearly half the nation's nuclear plants have failed mock terrorist raids, the NCI has reported. Duke Power's McGuire plant on Lake Norman and Catawba plant on Lake Wylie performed adequately during their most recent exercises, NRC documents show.

Leventhal criticized Duke's plan to use a new reactor fuel that is to include surplus weapons plutonium. NCI claims use of the new mixed-oxide fuel could kill more people in the event of a severe nuclear accident and accelerate aging of critical reactor parts.

Duke has said the fuel is similar to a nonweapons plutonium blend used to fuel some European reactors, and has a proven safety record.

Two anti-nuclear groups, the Nuclear Information and Resource Service and the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League, this weekend's conference sponsor, have challenged Duke's planned use of the fuel. Duke wants to extend the operating licenses of Catawba and McGuire by 20 years.

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