

"Our belief is that the containment would not be penetrated," Brown said.

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Minnesota Public Safety Commissioner Charlie Weaver said he's comfortable with precautions at the two plants.

"I'm not naive enough to think there is no way anybody could do anything to cause a problem there, because terrorists are smart, resourceful and suicidal," Weaver said. "But I feel very good about the preparedness of both sites and the ability of both sites to respond to any threat, whether a tornado or a terrorist. I don't lose any sleep over this."

At nuclear power plants, nuclear material often is found in different places, and some plants are more vulnerable than others. Furthermore, each of the materials contain different levels of radioactivity, adding yet another wrinkle to the potential threat they might pose.

At Prairie Island, each of the two nuclear reactors is surrounded by a thick dome. An adjacent building contains a spent-fuel pool, and outside, a short distance away, 14 storage casks hold waste material.

The reactors each contain relatively little of the most potent material. Both structures consist of a reinforced, 2½-foot-thick concrete dome with a steel liner three-quarters of an inch to 1½ inches thick.

Next door is a heavily bunkered steel-and-concrete building housing 800 tons of spent fuel submerged in a containment pool. That material isn't as potent, but there's more of it, and because the building isn't as sturdy as the two domes, experts say, it's more vulnerable.

Each cask, meanwhile, contains smaller amounts of even less potent material. Built to withstand strong impact, those cylindrical casks ideally would respond like bowling pins if struck — toppling but not breaking — and would be difficult to breach.

At Monticello, the reactor and spent-fuel pool are in the same containment building. No dry-storage casks are there because nuclear waste generated during the plant's earliest years was disposed of elsewhere years ago.

Nuclear Regulatory Commission spokesman Jan Strasma called the containment domes and casks exceptionally strong, and he noted an abundance of safety and backup controls at the plants. But he added a cautionary note.

"Pools with highly radioactive spent fuel stored inside are something of a concern," he said. But he called protection at Prairie Island adequate.

Abrahamson, Crocker and others aren't reassured.

"There is no way they are going to be, in my opinion, directly open to the public about the risk of their product," said state Rep. Alice Hausman, DFL-St. Paul.

Crocker contends that a small plane or even a well-aimed missile could damage the building containing the pool. The resulting loss of water would expose fuel rods to air and overheat them, scattering radioactive debris.

He said the plant should build a separate protective wall to deflect or lessen the impact of a first strike.

David Lochbaum, a nuclear safety engineer for the Union of Concerned Scientists, a Washington, D.C.-based nuclear watchdog organization, said emergency workers might only have minutes or hours to stop a meltdown from occurring in a reactor if cooling were disrupted. But they would have more time — as much as hours to days — to stop a similar problem in the spent-fuel pool.

"At Prairie Island, with the pool below ground, terrorists would have to be a lot more creative," Lochbaum said.

Those aren't his only concerns.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, he said, has dropped inspections aimed at exposing security weaknesses at nuclear plants

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"They told me they don't want to do that until they redefine the threat level," Lochbaum said.

Strasma said the NRC suspended those inspections so it can concentrate on improving the existing, overall security at the nation's nuclear plants. "We don't want it to distract from focusing on that," he said.

Lochbaum also is concerned that past exercises have concentrated on reactor defenses, not the spent-fuel pools and dry casks. And he contends hiring procedures need improvement.

"I still don't think it's such a big threat that people should pack up their bags until safe times return," Lochbaum said. "Where do you head to?"

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