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Nuclear plant security takeover considered

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By Rob Hotakainen
Herald Washington, D.C., Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Fearing that the nation's 103 nuclear reactors could be at risk for terrorist attacks, Congress is studying a federal takeover of security.

"We must ensure that a nuclear reactor on our soil is never turned against Americans as a weapon of terror," said Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., assistant majority leader.

After Congress voted to federalize airport security last year, the nuclear industry worried it could be next in line. Its representatives are on Capitol Hill, carrying a simple message: There's nothing to fix.

"Federalization does not help us," said Mark Findlay, security director for the Hudson-based Nuclear Management Co., which protects six reactors in the Midwest.

Under a Senate bill, Congress would order creation of a federal nuclear security force whose members would be required to meet strict standards. Among other things, they'd have to pass background checks, meet training requirements and be subjected to proficiency reviews.

The bill would require security evaluations at nuclear plants every two years, including "mock-terrorist attacks," in which simulated air, water and land assaults would be conducted by a mock team within the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. A companion bill has been introduced in the House.

Until Sept. 11, the nuclear power industry was content to keep a low profile, but Findlay said the industry is adopting a more public strategy. He is now in Washington, D.C., meeting with congressional staffers and conducting media interviews.

While Reid said nuclear reactors are "poorly protected," Findlay questioned whether the senator has ever toured one.

"I would challenge you or anyone to find a more secure facility anywhere in the world," Findlay said.

Reid has lined up three co-sponsors for the Nuclear Security Act. One is Sen. Jim Jeffords, a Vermont independent and chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which has jurisdiction over the NRC.

"We are living in a changed world, one that requires us to look at the darkest scenarios and plan accordingly," Jeffords said. The other two co-sponsors are Sens. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., and Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., both members of the environmental committee.

"Tragically, it took the horrific events of September 11th and a string of ensuing security breaches for our nation to federalize security at our nation's

airports," Clinton said. "It should not take another tragedy before we take action to increase security at our nation's nuclear power plants."

Findlay said it's wrong to compare security at nuclear plants with airports. He said nuclear plants use state-of-the-art equipment, noting 70 percent of the security personnel have prior experience with the military, law enforcement or industrial security.

He would not say how many people provide security, calling it "a secret number," but he said all security personnel pass mental and psychological tests, background screening and FBI checks. Workers earn an average of $35,000 a year, he said.

"We're not competing with the minimum-wage jobs out there," Findlay said. "I think there's no comparison with the (airport) screeners, so why federalize them?"

Findlay said the NRC already provides strong oversight, adding that a federal takeover would result in "the regulator becoming the employer." If that happened, he said, "I would think there'd be an ethical kind of issue."