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March 25, 2002

THE NUCLEAR INDUSTRY

Security at U.S. Reactors Criticized by Congressman

By MATTHEW L. WALD

WASHINGTON, March 24 — The Nuclear Regulatory Commission does not keep track of the number of foreign citizens working at nuclear power plants, or how many guards are employed at the plants or what the owners spend on security, the agency told Representative Edward J. Markey in response to his questions about security after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Mr. Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts, on Monday will release more than 100 pages of correspondence with the agency since Sept. 11 and said the documents revealed "black hole after black hole" in security. But a spokesman for the nuclear industry said that even without government involvement and data-gathering in every area, reactor operators were taking strong steps to assure security.

Mr. Markey, who has long been critical of the industry and the N.R.C., is sponsoring a bill under which the federal government would take over reactor security somewhat as airport security has been federalized. The bill, which is also sponsored by Democratic senators Harry Reid of Nevada, Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York and Joseph I. Lieberman of Connecticut, is opposed by the commission and the nuclear industry.

In response to questions from Mr. Markey to Richard A. Meserve, the chairman of the commission, the N.R.C. said reactor operators were not required to avoid hiring foreigners or to limit their access to nuclear plants. The commission also said it required a certain level of security but did not keep track of how much the licensees spent to provide it, or how many extra guards they had.

According to a summary of the N.R.C. responses prepared by Mr. Markey's staff, "it appears that Al Qaeda operatives such as Mohamed Atta or Marwan al-Shehhi could pass the narrow nature of the criminal screening still in use at U.S. nuclear power plants and gain unescorted access to the controlled area of a plant, just as they obtained student visas to attend flight school."

Mr. Markey also said it was hard to determine whether foreigners had criminal records in other countries.

Ralph E. Beedle, the chief nuclear officer of the Nuclear Energy Institute, the industry's main trade association, said that the names of all reactor employees were checked with the F.B.I. and that he assumed criminal records would be discovered in the process.

"The people we hire, for the most part, are folks who have come over here and gone through school," Mr. Beedle said. He added that when he was the chief of nuclear operations at the New York Power Authority, "I hired a lot of people out of Columbia University, C.C.N.Y., folks from India, China, that were over here for years as students."

Mr. Markey has called for putting anti-aircraft weapons at reactor sites, saying that only 4 of the nation's 103 nuclear reactors were designed

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with a plane crash in mind and that even then designers contemplated planes much smaller than those hijacked on Sept. 11. In addition, despite industry assertions that the containment buildings at reactors were "robust," Mr. Markey said that a plane that hit other areas of a reactor site could cause a meltdown.

The commission said that it had consulted with the Defense Department, the Office of Homeland Security and the Federal Aviation Administration and concluded that "there would be enormous command and control problems and a large potential for unintended consequences and collateral damage if such weaponry were deployed."

Mr. Markey and other critics say that even before Sept. 11 the commission had been slow to recognize the vulnerability to terrorists of the plants it licenses.

The commission, for example, passed over the question when it issued a paper on the licensing of a proposed plant to make plutonium fuel, called MOx, for reactors in South Carolina. A local environmental group had asked that an environmental impact statement include an assessment of the risks of terrorism, but the day after planes slammed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the commission staff said that the group "does not establish that terrorist acts (involving the proposed MOx facility or related materials) fall within the realm of 'reasonably foreseeable' events."


The commission told Mr. Markey that since Sept. 11 it has suspended exercises in which mock commandoes test defenses. It said that conducting such tests "in the current elevated threat environment would pose significant safety hazards to the licensees' employees and negatively impact security effectiveness." But Mr. Markey said that without such drills, the commission had no way to tell if the security improvements it had ordered were effective.


Mr. Markey argued for more security at sites where reactors have been retired but the fuel, which is highly radioactive, is still present. He also called for tests on the casks in which some fuel is stored, which were built to be sturdy enough to withstand a variety of accidents but which, like the reactors, were not built with attack in mind.

Mr. Markey said that on Monday he would put the agency correspondence on his Web page, [www.house.gov/markey](http://www.house.gov/markey).


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