

that does not know--and seems little interested in finding out--the nationality of nuclear reactor workers or the level of resources being spent on security at these sensitive facilities is not doing its job."

Markey is co-sponsoring a bill that would allow the federal government to take over security at nuclear plants in much the same way it has at airports after Sept. 11. Such a takeover has been vigorously opposed by the NRC and nuclear industry officials.

In his report, Markey said the NRC and its licensed operators have ignored concerns about safety for many years, but that the issue took on far more urgency after the Sept. 11 attacks, when evidence was found indicating that Al Qaeda operatives are interested in targeting nuclear materials and civilian nuclear power plants in the U.S.

Last month, The Times reported that a confidential intelligence report indicates that Osama bin Laden's operatives displayed a keen interest in exploiting vulnerabilities in security at sensitive U.S. facilities, including nuclear plants, and noted that Al Qaeda-trained agents were still at large in the United States.

"I think Markey is exactly on target in terms of his criticism of the commission's inaction on upgrading nuclear power plant security," said Paul Leventhal, president of the nonpartisan Nuclear Control Institute and a former staff director of the Senate nuclear regulation subcommittee.

Markey's report also said:

- The NRC does not know what its licensees spend on security or how many security guards are employed at each reactor.
- Twenty-one U.S. nuclear reactors are located within five miles of an airport, but 96% of all U.S. reactors were designed without regard for the potential for impact from even a small aircraft.
- The NRC has rejected placing anti-aircraft capabilities at nuclear facilities, even though other countries have chosen to do so, especially for reactors located close to airports.
- Spent nuclear fuel is stored in significant quantities at reactors across the U.S., including in California, yet it is often kept in buildings that are not "hardened structures," some of which reportedly have sheet metal roofs.

But Markey said he was particularly concerned about what he described as inadequate screening of nuclear plant employees for potential ties to terrorist organizations.

The NRC, he said, does not know how many foreign nationals it employs and requires little in the way of background checks. Security is so poor, he said, that terrorists could already be secretly working at reactors, and the independent operators--and the NRC--would not know it. He noted that Mohamed Atta and the other Sept. 11 hijackers had no criminal records or other problems that would be flagged under the current screening process.

Mitch Singer, a spokesman for the Nuclear Energy Institute, said the trade association and lobbying group for the nuclear power industry requires all power plants to screen employees and to monitor them closely.

The plants, he said, provide fingerprints and other information about prospective employees to the FBI, which then examines their employment, education and criminal history. Some employees working in sensitive areas must also pass psychological exams.

Singer also said the FBI "checks these people against the FBI watch list of suspected terrorists, and the FBI continues to update that list and share it with the [nuclear power] industry."

And the trade association has boasted in recent newspaper ads that security forces at nuclear power plants are highly professional. "They are

BIOTERRORISM

THE HUMAN TOLL

MULTIMEDIA

Video & Audio

Graphics

Photos

DISCUSSION

Times Headlines

In Need? Call the Warlord

At Pig Farm, Vancouver Police Reap Grisly Clues

Empty American Promises Embitter an Afghan Village

U.S. Steps Up Diplomacy on Mideast Peace

Plunging Currency Provokes New Pain

[more >](#)

SUBSCRIBE to the Los Angeles Times. [click here](#)



basically paramilitary forces and are highly trained," Singer said. "These are not your typical airport security people."

The FBI had no comment on how it works with the nuclear industry to screen prospective employees at nuclear power plants.

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives. For information about reprinting this article, go to <http://www.lats.com/rights/>.



Copyright 2002 Los Angeles Times
By visiting this site, you are agreeing to our [Terms of Service](#).

Powered by Genuity