

Home | Register | Home Delivery | Site Map | Archives | Print Edition | Advertise | Feedback | Help

March 26, 2002



advertisement

The World

The World **The Nation** California / Local **Business Politics** Sports Technology Travel Editorials, Op-Ed

Sections Arts & Entertainment Books Columns Education Food Health Highway 1 Magazine Obituaries Real Estate Religion Science So. Cal. Living Sunday Opinion Times Poll
For the Record

Editions Print Edition

National Wireless

Extras

College Connection Sweepstakes Discussion Boards Crossword Horoscope Lottery Traffic Weather Multimedia Enter Keyword(s):

Detailed Search SITE MAP

Ios Angoles Times

Subscription Services (800) 252-9141 Home Delivery Subscriptions Gift Subscriptions College Discount
Mail Subscriptions
Additional Subscription
Information & FAQs

- Careers
- · Homes
- Newspaper Ads
- ShoppingTimes GuidesRecycler.com

LA Times Initiatives

Times in Education Reading by 9 LA Times Books LA Times Family Fund
Times-Mirror Foundation
Community Events
Inside the Times



Nuclear Plants Said to Face Big Attack Risk

WASHINGTON -- The nation's 103 nuclear power reactors are vulnerable to a potentially catastrophic terrorist attack but have taken few safety countermeasures since Sept. 11, even though they have been targeted by Al Qaeda, a congressman alleged in a report released Monday.

In the document--which was immediately discounted by the nuclear power industry--Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) said the nation's commercially operated reactors are at risk from a wide variety of assaults, including sabotage from foreign workers who were not adequately screened for ties to terrorist organizations.

The nuclear plants are also vulnerable to the same kind of suicide hijackings that leveled the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon, Markey said in the report, titled "Security Gap: A Hard Look at Soft Spots in Our Civilian Nuclear Reactor Security."

Markey, a senior member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, is a longtime critic of the commission who has accused it of being too cozy with the industry it regulates. He said his report was based on information provided by the commission's five members and other regulatory officials in response to his detailed questions about nuclear plant safety after Sept. 11.

If hijackers rammed even a relatively small plane into a nuclear reactor, it could cause a fullscale meltdown and widespread radiation contamination, Markey said.

The report also contends that guards at nuclear plants are underpaid, undertrained and incapable of repelling an attack from marauding terrorists intent on gaining entry to the facility. And spent radioactive nuclear fuel from the plants also isn't protected as well as it should be, he added.

Industry Officials Say Report Is Too Critical

Nuclear regulatory officials said Markey's report was far too critical of safety issues at nuclear plants, and inaccurate in places. They would not, however, discuss in detail where the report might be inaccurate, saying they would respond on a point-by-point basis at a later date.

"On the whole, we disagree with his contention that we have not done enough to strengthen security," NRC spokesman Victor Dricks said. "Security at nuclear plants was strong before 9/11 and it was strengthened in the immediate aftermath of the attacks."

But Markey said many of the responses by NRC officials were unsatisfactory. "Black hole after black hole is described and left unaddressed," he wrote. "Post-[Sept. 11], a nuclear safety agency

Related Stories

Bush Puts Nuclear Use in 'Options Available' March 14, 2002

Democrats Divide Over Nuclear Plan March 13, 2002

Nuclear Use as 'Option' Clouds Issue March 12. 2002

Nuclear Plan Meant to Deter March 11, 2002

U.S. Works Up Plan for Using Nuclear Arms March 9, 2002

New Today

Afghan Quake Kills at Least 1.800

Top Stories

In Need? Call the Warlord

Nuclear Plants Said to Face Big Attack Risk

Empty American Promises Embitter an Afghan Village

Special Reports

A CHANGED AMERICA

An occasional series exploring the impact of the Sept. 11 attacks on American society.

Civil Liberites Take a Back Seat to Safety

Living With a 9/11 State of

Military Fuses Old, New to Create a Lethal Force

A Security Net of Sawhorses and Soldiers Big Brother Finds Ally in

Once-Wary High Tech

The Bottom Line: Forget **Business as Usual**

Creating in a World Where the Moon Can Fall

Local Governments Pay the Price for a Nation's New Vigilance

A Nation's Children Forge a **Shared Memory**

Architects Ask, 'What Did I Do to Cause This?

Complete Coverage

The attack on America and its aftermath

Sept. Oct. Nov. Dec. Jan. Feb.

March

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26

RESPONSE TO TERROR

COMPLETE COVERAGE OSAMA BIN LADEN



Earn Your B.S. Degree in 3 Years

Are You Ready for:

<u>Telecommunications</u>

Computer Information

Multimedia

T's Your Future **Choose Carefully**

Click Here to Learn More About Mt. Sierra College







that does not know--and seems little interested in **BIOTERRORISM** 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

THE HUMAN TOLL MULTIMEDIA Video & Audio Graphics 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

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 antiaircraft 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 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 $\frac{1}{2} \frac{1}{2} \frac$



Copyright 2002 Los Angeles Times By visiting this site, you are agreeing to our Terms of Service.

Powered by Genuity