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Hijackers qualified to work at nuke plant

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WASHINGTON, March 25 (UPI) -- Federal regulators have no set requirements for checking backgrounds of nuclear plant security employees and several of the Sept. 11 hijackers could have qualified to work as security guards, according to a report released Monday by Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass.

The report also claims that most plants could not withstand a plane crash.

Markey, a senior member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, has been a critic of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for years. After the Sept. 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington, he demanded that the agency explain its security requirements for plant operators, including employee screening ad ability to withstand various terror attacks.

The responses did not sit well with the opponent of nuclear power.

"There is little comfort to be found in the agency's response to my questions," Markey said in a statement. "Black hole after black hole is described and unaddressed. Post 9/11, a nuclear safety agency 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."

The Nuclear Energy Institute, a trade association representing the industry, disputes the allegations, and a spokeswoman said the charges are consistent with Markey's opposition to nuclear energy in general.

"The vast majority of this report is inaccurate," said NEI spokeswoman Thelma Wiggins. "This is just part of Mr. Markey's long-standing attempt to shutdown the nuclear power industry."

According to the NRC, employees with access to nuclear power plants, which are mostly operated by private firms, only need to pass a criminal background check that covers the United States. No investigation into the background of a foreign citizen in their home country is required. The NRC was also unable to tell Markey the number of foreign citizens working at nuclear facilities.

"In short, it appears that al Qaida 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 the plant, just as they obtained student visas to attend flight school," the report says. "As long as they have no criminal record in this country, al Qaida operatives are not required to pass any security check intended to find ad expose terrorist links prior to their employment."

The NRC also does not require plant operators, or licensees, to provide detailed information on security operations to federal regulators, but Wiggins claims the report distorts the truth about measures put into place to screen and monitor employees.

"Nuclear plant employees are required to pass stringent security and background checks," she said. "And their behavior and performance is monitored daily. As an industry, employees get the same background check performed by the FBI and this is mandated by the NRC. They are constantly evaluated for fitness for duty."

As for the claims about foreign nationals working in plants, Wiggins said the vast majority are long-time residents of the United States, usually educated in the country and have extensive work histories that can be verified.

As for a terror attack similar to the Sept. 11 crashes that took the lives of thousands, the Markey report finds serious design problems with most of the 103 commercial reactors that would leave most susceptible to an airline attack.

"There are 103 active civilian nuclear reactors in the U.S.," the report says. "According to the NRC, the licensees of 43 of those reactors on 28 sites did not even consider the probability of an accidental aircraft impact when the reactors were designed, built and licensed. In an additional 56 reactors on 37 sites, the licensees concluded that the probability of a accidental was so low that it did not have to be incorporated into the design of the reactors."

NRC documents show that four reactors were designed to withstand the impact of aircraft weighing up to 12,500 pounds, about 3 percent the size of the Boeing 767's that hit the World Trade Center. Only the Three Mile Island facilities were found sufficiently reinforced to withstand a crash by a large airliner.

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