

Caution: Yellow alert

Shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks, the Pentagon hired several Hollywood screenwriters to create possible terrorist scenarios, the better to identify potential threats to the United States from evil masterminds.

No doubt some of those imaginary disasters centered around nuclear power plants, which are certainly among the most appealing targets for terrorists seeking to cause maximum havoc in the United States.

You don't need to be an action-hero like Stallone or Schwarzenegger to know that it's bad news when the state's lone nuclear reactor, Vermont Yankee, received the worst grade in the country in repulsing terrorist attacks. During a mock assault staged last summer by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Vermont Yankee's defenses apparently failed in significant ways. On a four-tiered, color-coded scale, Vermont Yankee earned a yellow; only red is lower, and no other atomic station in the country rated as poorly as the plant located along the Connecticut River.

Monday, after reviewing the record, the NCR reaffirmed the yellow grade for Vermont Yankee, noting that the deficiencies encountered during the drill were "predictable, repeatable and indicative of a broad programmatic problem."

The NRC's latest action casts doubt on claims by Gov. Howard Dean and other state and company officials that Vermont Yankee is secure as possible. "I'm confident Yankee has instituted and implemented the appropriate actions," said Christine Salembier, commissioner of the Department of Public Service, which oversees Vermont Yankee. She added that the governor's concerns over the plant also have been satisfied.

Neither state authorities nor the owners of Vermont Yankee have made public a comprehensive security plan for the nuclear facility. Instead, they have relied on variations of the theme "Trust me." Vermont Yankee spokesman Robert Williams, for example, responded to the NRC latest criticism by insisting that "important" changes had been made after the fateful summer drill, but he declined to elaborate.

In light of the NRC statement this week, such vague reassurances are insufficient. The public deserves more information to security plans at Vermont Yankee, or at least an evaluation of the security program by a reliable, independent expert, perhaps one hired by the Legislature.

Vermont Yankee is considered the top terrorist target in the state. The events of Sept. 11 showed that even the most far-fetched fantasies of Hollywood pale in comparison to the horrifying deeds that can be conceived in the twisted, hate-filled minds of terrorists.

There is no margin for error in ensuring public safety and confidence. If anything happens at Vermont Yankee, it won't be a movie.

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