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PRINT EDITION: PAGE 1 / A SECTION | METRO | SPORTS | BUSINESS | LIVING | OPINION | FRONT-PAGE IMAGE | SPECIAL SERVICES

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Atlanta Tech

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Food

Buyer's Edge

FRIDAY

Preview

Wheels

SATURDAY

Wheels

Faith & Values

Sunday sections

Arts

Travel

Living

@issue

Homefinder

Personal Tech

Jobs

Communities

DAILY GWINNETT

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

THURSDAY

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Airliner too much for nuclear plants

Facilities couldn't withstand impact

Brett Lieberman - Newhouse News Service

Friday, March 29, 2002

Washington — Government regulators have acknowledged for the first time that none of the 103 operating nuclear reactors in the United States could withstand the impact of an airliner like those that crashed into the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

Concern that nuclear power plants could be an inviting target for terrorists bent on using an airplane to unleash radiation prompted an intense public-relations effort by the nuclear power industry to ease public worries after the Sept. 11 attacks. Federal officials also played down the threat and insisted that nuclear containment buildings are "robust" and capable of withstanding large explosions.

But now, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has released documents showing that only 4 percent of U.S. nuclear power plants took plane crashes into account in their designs, and that even those contemplated only smaller aircraft traveling at slower speeds. No consideration of plane crashes was included in the designs of the other 96 percent of nuclear plants.

"When the plants were designed, large aircraft that are presently used were not in use,"said NRC spokeswoman Sue Gagner.

The agency acknowledged that critical systems that provide cooling, electricity and storage of spent nuclear fuel are mostly in nonhardened buildings that could not withstand a Sept. 11-type attack.

The revelations were included in a report made available by Rep. Edward Markey (D-Mass.), based on responses to his queries from NRC Chairman Richard Meserve. Markey, a frequent critic of the NRC, said the agency's acknowledgement shows that additional steps need to be taken to improve nuclear plant safety.

The "NRC has admitted that even an aircraft impact at the auxiliary electrical or cooling facilities could trigger a core meltdown at a nuclear reactor," Markey said, "and yet the NRC refuses to upgrade security, refuses to install anti-aircraft weaponry, refuses to ensure that security at decommissioned reactors is maintained, and refuses to ensure that foreign nationals employed at the reactors undergo security background checks."

On Wednesday, the NRC maintained that reactors are tough targets even though it has not evaluated whether they could withstand an airplane crash. "Even though they were not designed to withstand aircraft crashes, they are extremely rugged structures,"" Gagner said.

While many nuclear plants continue to have additional protection from National Guard troops and state police because of Sept. 11, the NRC has rejected the idea of deploying anti-aircraft weapons, as some nations have done.

The NRC and plant owners never contemplated that a large airliner would intentionally be crashed into a nuclear plant when most were built in the 1960s and 1970s.

Fifty-five of the nation's 60 nuclear plants are within 15 miles of a public airport. But most of those are tiny, carrying fewer than 100,000 departing passengers a year, according to NRC and Federal Aviation Administration data.

In nine instances, operating nuclear plants are close to airports that serve more than 100,000 passengers. Charlotte International, the nation's 21st-busiest with more than 11 million departures a year, lies between two nuclear plants. Other cities whose airports are within 15 miles of plants include New Orleans; Pittsburgh; Chattanooga; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Newport News, Va.; and San Jose and San Luis Obispo, Calif.

The ninth city is Harrisburg, Pa., with its airport situated three miles from Three Mile Island, the only nuclear power plant "constructed with special design features to protect vital areas from crash impact and fire effects," according to the NRC documents. However, the reinforcement of outer walls, thickening of concrete sections, unique internal features, and special fire protection and ventilation incorporated to deal with aircraft crashes at Three Mile Island probably would be inadequate in an attack like Sept. 11.

Two other plants included design features to withstand an airplane impact, but they were minimal. The Limerick nuclear plant near Pottstown, Pa., and the Seabrook plant near Portsmouth, N.H., evaluated and incorporated features to

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1/2

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withstand the impact of an airplane weighing as much as 12,500 pounds, "less than . . . 5 percent of the weight of the jets used in the Sept. 11 attacks.

"With respect to the remaining sites, the probability of an aircraft impact was either estimated or judged by inspection to be sufficiently low such that the event need not be considered in the design basis," the NRC said.

David Lochbaum, nuclear safety engineer for the Union of Concerned Scientists, said it would be difficult to retrofit existing plants, but new safety features should be incorporated in the next generation of plants.

"The plants are what they are," Lochbaum said. "It's too late to go back and install 6 more feet of concrete."

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