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NRC: Nuclear power plants not protected against air crashes

By The Associated Press

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HARRISBURG -- Government regulators have acknowledged that the nation's 103 operating nuclear reactors could not withstand the impact of an airliner the size of the ones used in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, a newspaper said.

While industry and federal officials downplayed the threat shortly after the attacks, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission conceded in newly released documents that even an accidental crash was not factored into designs of 96 percent of U.S. nuclear plants, The Patriot-News of Harrisburg reported in Thursday's editions.

And even for the few plants where the threat was considered -- notably Three Mile Island near Harrisburg -- design changes were intended only to protect against smaller aircraft traveling at slower speeds.

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

The agency also said systems that provide cooling, electricity and storage of spent fuel are mostly in nonhardened buildings that could not withstand an aircraft or missile attack.

U.S. Rep. Edward J. Markey, D-Mass., a frequent NRC critic who prepared a report based on NRC Chairman Richard A. Meserve's responses to his questions, said the responses show that more needs to be done to improve nuclear plant safety.

The NRC has admitted that even a crash at the auxiliary electrical or cooling facilities could trigger a core meltdown, but still the agency "refuses to install anti-aircraft weaponry," or take other security measures, Markey said.

The agency maintained Wednesday that reactors remain difficult targets.

"Even though they were not designed to withstand aircraft crashes, they are extremely rugged structures," Gagner said.

When most plants were built in the 1960s and 1970s, regulators and owners never dreamed that a large airliner could intentionally be crashed into a nuclear plant.

Fifty-five of the nation's 60 nuclear plants lie within 15 miles of public airports, most small airports carrying fewer than 100,000 departing passengers a year, NRC and FAA data indicate. But nine plants, including Three Mile Island and plants near Pittsburgh and Charlotte, N.C., are near airports that serve more than 100,000 passengers.

Three Mile Island, three miles from Harrisburg International Airport, is the only nuclear power plant "constructed with special design features to protect vital areas from crash impact and fire effects," according to the new documents.

Yet even those features -- which include reinforcement of outer walls, thickening of concrete sections, special fire protection and ventilation -would likely be inadequate, according to the NRC.

TMI was designed to withstand an impact of 200,000 pounds at 230 mph, but a Boeing 757 or 767 such as those used in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon weighs between 272,500 and 450,000 pounds, and the planes used in the attacks traveled at speeds of 350 mph to 537 mph when they struck their targets.

TMI was not built to withstand the impact of a larger airplane because "the probability of an on-site crash was sufficiently low," according to the NRC documents.

Two other plants -- the Limerick nuclear plant near Pottstown and Seabrook plant in Portsmouth, N.H. -- were outfitted with more modest design features to help them withstand the impact of an airplane weighing up to 12,500 pounds.

"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 documents said.



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

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

On the Net:

U.S. Rep. Edward J. Markey: http://www.house.gov/markey

Nuclear Regulatory Commission: http://www.nrc.gov

Union of Concerned Scientists: http://www.ucsusa.org/index.html

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