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Nuclear plant security called 'impressive'

Dino DiSanto

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Senator visits powerplant.

Senator George Voinovich discusses security at the Perry Nuclear Plant Monday following his tour of the plant.

Security at the Perry Nuclear Power Plant continues to live up to the scrutiny of federal officials.

U.S. Sen. George V. Voinovich was the latest public official to visit the North Perry Village plant and give it high accolades.

Ohio's Republican junior senator said security at the plant owned by Akron-based FirstEnergy Corp. makes it one of the most secure nuclear plants in the country.

"Very impressive," Voinovich said during a Monday afternoon visit to the Perry plant.

Voinovich gave a glowing report on the privately trained security forces and also praised the high tech weaponry on hand and the physical barriers in place to impede anyone's entrance.

"It is incredible how difficult it is to get into the plant," the senator said.

Voinovich's visit is significant for the nuclear industry for a couple of reasons.

The first is the former Ohio governor is the ranking Republican on the subcommittee that oversees the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Second, he is a major proponent of the United States expanding its use of nuclear power in order to shift the country's reliance from coal.

This is significant because not long ago, the nuclear industry was enjoying a Cinderella-type story. The industry had a friendly Congress and the backing of Americans for building the first new nuclear power plants in a generation.

Voinovich was helping to lead that charge by introducing legislation last year that would encourage development of more nuclear power plants by updating regulations and policies of the NRC.

But since Sept. 11, Congress has sounded more like the fairy tale's cruel stepsisters in demanding security makeovers and aggressively questioning nuclear plants' readiness to repel terrorist attacks.

"If we have to turn these reactors into impregnable fortresses to withstand kamikaze attacks, it begs the question of whether it's worth it," said Robert Alvarez, a former Energy Department official who is executive director of the New York-based STAR Foundation, which is critical of nuclear power.

Congress started getting cranky when the NRC changed its assessment about the threat to nuclear plants from terrorists who turn jetliners into missiles.

Just after Sept. 11, the commission said that plants could withstand the impact of commandeered aircraft. Later, the commission said it was possible that such a crash would cause damage "that would result in the release of radiation."

Senate Majority Whip Harry Reid, D-Nev., is among sponsors of a wide range of bills that would toughen the security standards for defending against an array of assaults on plants and would make federal employees of the security guards who work there.

As it stands, a nuclear plant has to demonstrate a capacity to repel what is known in the industry as a "three and one attack" - three well-trained and heavily armed terrorists with one person inside the plant providing assistance.

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Reid's bill would require plants to be able to defend against attacks by multiple large teams being assisted by several people inside. Plants also would need to demonstrate the ability to repel attacks from the air and water.

The legislation has drawn opposition from the NRC and the nuclear industry.

The Nuclear Energy Institute's Marvin Fertel said he doubts whether plants could comply.

"If they passed that bill, we would essentially be required to have an army, a navy and an air force that would be able to shoot down planes," Fertel said.

David Lochbaum, a nuclear safety engineer with the Union of Concerned Scientists and a supporter of the legislation, argued it would "raise the bar" for safety.

Beyond federalizing plant workers, it would require "force-on-force" tests every two years to test plants' capacity to repel terrorists. Those tests have been administered every eight years on average; about half of the plants routinely failed.

Perry, though, is one of the few plants that has passed the exercise with flying colors.

Voinovich noted NRC Chairman Paul Meserve gave Perry the highest rating possible.

"This is one of best trained private forces in the country," Voinovich said. "Federalizing them would not be a wise move."

The senator, who helped start the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, was critical of other legislators who were quick to come up with legislation in reaction to the fears of residents without first getting an inside look at the nuclear industry.

"I think a lot of people in my business need to get facts before making comments about situations," the senator said. "If you really look at these facilities, they are the most inspected and looked at in the country."

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