NUCLEAR SAFETY: THE RECORD SUGGESTS OTHERWISE

NUCLEAR SAFETY: A POOR TRACK RECORD

The NRC now admits that nuclear power is far more dangerous than previously thought. Robert Bernero, director of the Commission's Risk-Analysis Division, told the New York Times that the figures regarding the probability of a serious accident are "about ten times higher than we would like" them to be.[1]

According to a report prepared for the NRC by Oak Ridge National Laboratory, 19,400 "mishaps" occurred at domestic nuclear plants between 1969 and 1979, 140 of which could have led to a major accident.[2]

WHAT WAS LEARNED FROM THE TMI ACCIDENT?

Years after TMI, it appears that the NRC and the industry have failed to heed the warnings sent by panels investigating the accident:

> "Unless fundamental changes...are made in the way commercial nuclear reactors are built, operated and regulated in this country, similar accidents...with potentially serious consequences to public health and safety...are likely to recur."[3]

A report released in December 1982 by the GAO charges that the "NRC has not implemented even one long-term action contained in the [NRC approved action] plan which would correct one of the most significant causes of the Three Mile Island accident - operator training and qualification."[4]

THE NRC AND THE LICENSING PROCESS

The testimony of former NRC employees supports these safety concerns. Reactor safety engineer Robert Pollard has stated that components in nuclear plants are rarely inspected; NRC audits typically concern themselves with analysis of paper, covering only small areas of a given plant. Pollard also insists that NRC safety reviews conducted prior to the issuance of a license are inadequate.[5] Peter Bradford, who resigned last year from the NRC, has since written that "75% of the review takes place after the plant is nearly finished," and that "the U.S. licensing process is strongly pro-nuclear,"[6] "the work of propagandists rather than statesmen."[7]

ZIMMER: A CASE IN POINT

In 1981, the NRC commissioners overturned the Atomic Safety Licensing Board's decision to reopen hearings and halt construction at the Zimmer nuclear plant near Cincinnati. Then, in spite of a Justice Department investigation of possible criminal violations of Zimmer's quality assurance program, the NRC decided to exclude the quality control issue from upcoming licensing hearings. NRC Commissioner Asselstine remarked that the NRC showed "a trend to limit, restrict, [and] close out public participation. If you don't talk about quality assurance at the licensing hearing, there's no real meaningful forum to raise the issues."[8] An NRC investigator summed up the situation at Zimmer by remarking to a reporter that "[T]he bottom line is that after 14 years you could have a plant sitting there and no one will know if the damn thing is constructed safely."[9]

In November 1982, as public pressure grew, the NRC finally ordered work halted at Zimmer "until safe construction is assured by an independent organization".[10]

THREE MILE ISLAND (TMI) TODAY: THE ACCIDENT IS NOT OVER

Pennsylvanians still live in fear of General Public Utilities' (GPU) crippled reactor at TMI. For the citizens of the Harrisburg area, the effects of the accident continue:

- In the spring of 1978, the year prior to the accident, the rate of infants that died within a month after birth was 7.6 per 1,000 births, both in Harrisburg and within a 10-mile radius of TMI. This mortality rate increased dramatically in the spring of 1979 to 19.3 in the 10-mile area, and 29.7 in Harrisburg.[11]

- The utility still has no comprehensive cleanup program for the damaged reactor.