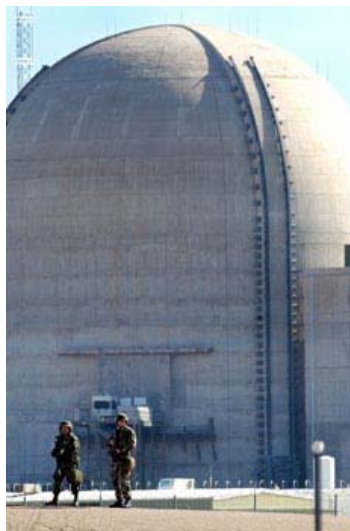




Do American Nuclear Power Plants Have Adequate Emergency Evacuation Plans?

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Armed National Guard troops at the Palo Verde, Arizona nuclear power plant 55 miles west of Phoenix on March 20, 2003, after notice of possible terrorist threat. Photograph © 2003 by The Associated Press.

Earthfiles, news category.

March 22, 2003 Washington, D. C. - The United States is at war with Iraq. The Homeland Security office is at Code Orange which means "High Risk of Terrorist Attacks." On Thursday, March 20, Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano sent National Guard troops to the Palo Verde nuclear power plant 55 miles west of Phoenix. Two reasons were given. One was that Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge asked all states with nuclear power plants to beef up security. The other reason was connected to a *Washington Times* report that American intelligence had information about Iraqi "sleeper cells" in the United States with plans to attack the Palo Verde nuclear power plant, the largest in the nation.

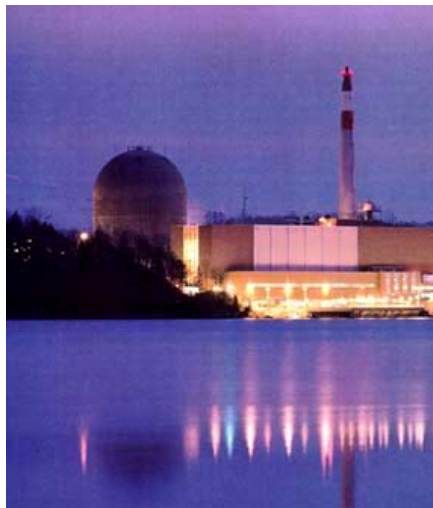


Homeland Security raised the color code advisory system to Orange "High" on Monday, March 17. Graphic provided by Homeland Security.

Jim McDonald at Arizona Public Service Co. which operates Palo Verde would not comment on intelligence reports, but said, "Security is elevated. No question about that."

Another nuclear power plant which sits in a heavily populated region of the country is the Indian Point nuclear power plant in Buchanan, New York, 35 miles north of mid-town Manhattan. Twenty million people live within a 50 mile radius of Indian Point. An emergency at that plant would affect at least four surrounding counties in both New York and Connecticut. Congressman Christopher Shays in Connecticut's 14th District is Chairman of the House Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security in Emerging Threats and International Relations, and Member of the Select House Committee on Homeland Security.

Recently he held a subcommittee hearing to ask the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and Entergy Power that now operates the Indian Point nuclear power plant to explain their evacuation plan in the event of a terrorist attack or serious accident that could effect the lives of several million people in the New York state and Connecticut counties surrounding the plant.



Indian Point nuclear power plant in Buchanan, New York, on the Hudson River 35 miles north of mid-town Manhattan, operated by Entergy Nuclear. Twenty million people live within a 50 mile radius of Indian Point. Photograph courtesy EPRI, the Electric Power Research Institute.

When Congressman Shays said he felt that an evacuation plan should accommodate people within at least 25 miles, and preferably 50 miles, of Indian Point, the NRC and Entergy Nuclear representatives insisted under oath that evacuation concerns were not needed further than ten miles around Indian Point. Congressman Shays made it clear that his constituents would disagree. He plans more hearings and may soon propose that the Indian Point nuclear power plant be shut down entirely until a reasonable and adequate evacuation plan is created for 25 to 50 miles around the nuclear power plant.

I talked with him about why the NRC and Entergy would so strongly insist that only a ten mile evacuation plan were necessary.



Indian Point nuclear power plant at Buchanan, New York, is circled 35 miles north of New York City, New York.

Interview:

Congressman Christopher Shays, Connecticut's 14th District (Republican), Chairman, House Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security Emerging Threats and International Relations; and Member of Select House Committee on Homeland Security, Washington, D. C.: "I think we've got a real big disconnect (between the NRC's and Entergy's concerns and the public's concerns). I think a ten mile evacuation plan is a bit absurd, considering that people within the ten miles are going to go somewhere else. They are going to go through other communities. And as they evacuate and go through these other communities, it's clear these other communities are going to say, 'We're not staying here.' So, my judgment is that you need to know what to do in the core area and then just outside that rim. But I have constituents that are 25 miles away from Indian Point and I know this for a fact if there was a problem at Indian Point, they would leave New Caanan, they would leave Stamford, they would leave Darien, they would leave Richfield and get further away from this plant.

THEN YOU HAVE THE PROBLEM OF WHAT IS THE CONTINGENCY PLAN FOR DEALING WITH HUMAN PANIC AND CONGESTION IN AN EMERGENCY AT INDIAN POINT?

Well, one of the things that is fairly clear is that most of the public does not know what the evacuation plan would be. And I think part of it is that the industry does not want to talk about evacuation plans because that makes people nervous about the plant. So, I think there is this built-in disincentive not to inform people about what they might have to do if there was a catastrophic event or even not a catastrophic event, but an event that was serious, or even less than serious. The public will hear about it and they will want to make sure they get a little further away from the plant.

THAT ARGUMENT MIGHT MAKE SENSE IN A NON-WAR, NON-WORRIED TIME. BUT WE ARE SERIOUSLY WORRIED ABOUT TERRORISTS IN THIS COUNTRY. MAKING THE ISSUE OF TERRORISM ATTACKS ON NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS AN EVEN BIGGER ISSUE. AT THE HEARING, ATTORNEY GENERAL BLUMENTHAL FROM CONNECTICUT STATED NUCLEAR POWER PLANT SECURITY IS STILL IN THE STONE AGE.

He said it's still in the stone age. I thought it was old theology and he one-upped us! He basically felt that these nuclear electric generating plants are basically dirty bombs in a community, potentially a dirty bomb in a community, and I happen to agree with him. Unfortunately, the industry the NRC and FEMA pretty much view any event at an electric nuclear generating power plant as any event whether or not it's caused by terrorists or not. But that basically overlooks that while they might do something to the plant, there might be a problem with the roads, or a bridge blown out. There might be something done in coordination. So, I think it is very foolish of the NRC to think that a breakdown caused by terrorists would be no different than a breakdown happening for other reasons.

RIGHT. AND I THINK YOU ALSO ASKED IF YOU TOOK ONE OF THOSE 747'S THAT CRASHED INTO THE WORLD TRADE TOWERS AND YOU CRASHED IT DIRECTLY INTO SAY, INDIAN POINT. I BELIEVE THAT ENTERGY WAS ARGUING THAT THEY THOUGHT THOSE CONTAINMENT WALLS WOULD HOLD AGAINST A 747. BUT I'VE SEEN OTHER LITERATURE THAT HAS SAID THE BIGGER DANGER IS WHAT HAPPENS TO THE COMPUTERS, THE BACK UP GENERATORS..

Oh, absolutely. Yes, you might have the nuclear core that is protected and under a hardened facility. But in many cases the brains that determines what happens in the nuclear core is outside and not well defended. And so it raises very serious questions. If you lose the brain, what happens to the system? How does it function?

I WAS READING THIS GAO PAGE, 'EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS ISSUES AT THE INDIAN POINT NUCLEAR POWER PLANT' THAT WAS JUST PUT OUT. THE LAST SENTENCE AS THEY DID AN OVERVIEW OF HOW MANY PROBLEMS AND CONCERNS THAT THERE HAVE BEEN AT THESE PLANTS HAVING TO DO WITH PAGER COMMUNICATION FAILURES AND VARIOUS OTHER PROBLEMS IN THE DRY RUN TESTS THEY HAVE DONE. AT THE END, IT SAYS, 'NRC CONCLUDED THAT THE WITT (REPORT) GIVES UNDUE WEIGHT TO THE IMPACT OF A TERRORIST ATTACK. I DON'T UNDERSTAND THAT IN THE CONTEXT OF MARCH 2003.

I don't understand it either. The whole motivation of our re-examining our nuclear power plants is the fact that they may be vulnerable to terrorists. So, I guess what they (Entergy and NRC) would say is it might make it more likely that you would have a problem, but the general plan would still be the same and I just think that is not true. How does someone start to prevent the catastrophe at a plant when all of a sudden they are being shot at as well. What is the implication if terrorists then do other things to cause problems in the community? Like block off a road, blow up a bridge. I mean, there are a whole host of things that could happen.

But bottom line: we need this (Indian Point) plant basically shut down until we have an evacuation plan that makes sense and the public knows about and involves more than just 10 miles.

ENTERGY IS FIGHTING THAT SO HARD BECAUSE THEY HAVE MONEY AT STAKE IN OPERATING IT?

I think they sincerely believe that we don't need to (have evacuation plan greater than 10 miles from Indian Point). Obviously, they have a big investment. But having said that, I'm a member of Congress and I have lots of concerns. I care about global warming. I care about the fact that 50% of our energy for electrical is generated by coal, and 20% by nuclear (nuclear) which happens not to be contributing to global warming. We also have an energy shortage. So, I'm not going to be mindless in terms of how I think about these issues. We can't just all of a sudden shut down all these plants. And it would be foolish to try. But we can say, 'Where you don't have a good evacuation plan then we need to make sure we stop operating until we get one.'

HOW DO YOU THINK YOU COULD BRING THAT ABOUT?

I think having hearings like this and putting pressure on the NRC to re-evaluate their whole concept of terrorism. I think having to explain their reasons in public all of that leads to the possibility and perhaps the likelihood, frankly, that they will re-evaluate their position.

I'm putting a lot of pressure on now. I've been at a heightened sense of alert for a long time! I know that some people are at amber. I happen to be at red."

More Information:



103 nuclear power plants in the United States above supply

about twenty percent of the nation's electricity. Pennsylvania has five fully active reactors,

including Three Mile Island which is near the Harrisburg International Airport.

There are no commercial reactors in Alaska and Hawaii as of 2000.

Graphic © 2001 by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Websites:

http://www.ems.org/nuclear/indian_point.html

<http://www.entergy-nuclear.com/Nuclear/sites/plantInfo.asp>

<http://www.nrc.gov/>

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/homeland>

<http://www.nci.org/>

<http://www.tmia.com>

<http://www.pogo.org>

<http://www.fas.org>

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