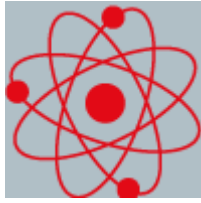


■ Debate



Our view on nuclear security: Asleep on the job

Guards, owners and regulators all snooze, leaving plants vulnerable.

This March, an anonymous whistle-blower sent a letter to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, warning that guards at the Peach Bottom nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania were routinely sleeping on the job. The letter writer said he was writing on behalf of other guards who were tired of covering up for their colleagues. He begged the NRC to do something and even suggested five ways to catch the sleepers, who are supposed to be on constant alert to repel terrorist attacks.

For months, nothing happened. Then a frustrated guard surreptitiously videotaped several dozing colleagues and gave the tape to WCBS-TV in New York City, which aired it late last month. With that, all hell broke loose.

Exelon, the energy company that owns Peach Bottom, fired Wackenhut, the security company that provided the guards. The NRC, which said its initial investigation had been "unable to substantiate" the whistle-blower's report, belatedly launched a high-profile probe. At a public meeting this week, officials conceded that 10 guards had slept on day and night shifts and that at least one supervisor had pressured would-be whistle-blowers to keep quiet about it.

If this were an episode of *The Simpsons*, it would be amusing. But the failures here are real and sobering. The plant owner failed to supervise its security contractor, the security firm failed to supervise its guards and the NRC failed to do its regulatory job, even when an insider provided a road map.

Sleeping guards and other security issues have occurred at other plants in recent years. Sometimes NRC inspectors have aggressively corrected the problems on their own, but too often it has taken whistle-blowers, the media, members of Congress or outside groups to press for action.

This is troubling at a time when the nation's need for energy, and concerns about global warming, are sparking a nuclear renaissance. That means utilities will be building and operating more plants. It's important that they be better managed and supervised than the Peach Bottom incident suggests they sometimes are.

Since 9/11, nuclear power plants have become a security priority for the simple reason that a successful terrorist attack on one could be catastrophic. The Project on Government Oversight, an independent watchdog group that has long followed nuclear plant issues, estimates that it would take terrorists just 45 seconds to go from the Peach Bottom plant's outer fence to its spent fuel pool, where an explosion and fire could create a radioactive plume stretching for miles.

The obvious severity of that threat does nothing to make the guard work less tedious, however, and under current regulations, guards can work as much as 72 hours a week, or six 12-hour shifts. It's little wonder that the Peach Bottom whistle-blower's letter complained about guards coming to work "exhausted." After an absurd years-long rule-making process, the NRC is finally planning to trim hours somewhat, but guards will still be able to work shifts long enough to sap their attentiveness — especially if they're not properly supervised.

The Peach Bottom case is a stark example of what has to go right in the crucial effort to keep nuclear plants safe. In this case, the plant owner, the security company and the NRC all failed. It shouldn't take a hidden camera to make them do their jobs.

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