

Producing power with too much danger

By **JIM WARREN**

DURHAM -- The multi-billion dollar question is whether the nuclear industry can fool enough people with its fallacies - even to pay for new reactors in the Carolinas, including Wake County.

A massive public relations machine -- PR firms, lobbyists, academics, think-tanks -- is aggressively disinforming the public about the safety of the current fleet of aging reactors and waste cooling pools, the supply-demand equation and the feasibility of transitioning to clean technologies.

For years the industry has muted news coverage of numerous reactor emergencies and serious accidents. With the attempted nuclear revival, most news items skate past Three Mile Island and Chernobyl as rarities -- ignoring previous accidents elsewhere while dismissing safety as a problem of the past.

In 2003, the industry suffered its greatest number of sudden reactor shutdowns since 1996, and the most safety system actuations in eight years. Also in 2003, the Union of Concerned Scientists used federal data to calculate a 34 percent probability of a meltdown at a U.S. reactor within three years, due to design flaws in emergency cooling systems. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission identified that deficiency nine years ago; it's calling for repairs in 2007.

The NRC has also allowed many plants to operate for years with severe violations of regulations designed to protect reactors against fires, which constitute 50 percent of the industry-wide risk for meltdowns. Now the industry is pressing the NRC to retroactively legalize the violations, thereby gutting regulations ordered after Alabama's Browns Ferry plant was largely destroyed by fire in 1975.

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The industry says new, experimental reactors would be safer. Yet it insists that taxpayers insure against any disaster exceeding \$10 billion -- although federal studies estimate that reactor and waste pool accidents could exceed \$500 billion in off-site damage. Such a radiation release could cause thousands of fatalities and contaminate several states. (You could lose your home, but not your mortgage.)

Nuclear promoters admit the potential for catastrophes, but their calculations showing low probabilities exclude a key factor: intentional acts of harm.

Despite industry contentions, nuclear plants remain lightly defended against many plausible attacks by domestic or foreign terrorists. Plant owners insist the military is responsible for defense against all but the most modest attacks.

In April, the National Academy of Sciences called for urgent action, saying attacks on waste cooling pools could put the entire inventory of the pool, potentially hundreds of metric tons of "spent" fuel, at risk. Most waste pools contain more radioactivity than was released by Chernobyl, and 32 U.S. plants house spent fuel pools high inside buildings covered only by sheet metal or other lightweight construction.

The industry is distorting the Academy's findings. As former State Department security expert Bennett Ramberg notes, the study "belies the NRC's persistent mantra that our nuclear plants are effectively immune," and says the FBI considers nuclear power plants "at the top of the hit list of infrastructure targets that terrorists would be tempted to attack."

Because radioactive waste fuel will be stored at plants for decades, any prudent society would, at the very least, demand it be transferred from pools into bunkered, dry cask storage.

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Nuclear promoters even try to exploit the growing climate change crisis (though the same corporations also operate coal-fired plants). But nuclear plants take many years to build and cost billions each, and according to energy expert Arjun Makhijani, to have a noticeable impact on global warming, 2,000 reactors would have to be built by 2050. Worldwide, there is neither the design, construction or regulatory capacity -- nor the hundreds of billions of annual dollars -- to achieve that.

Industry's answer? "Streamline" the approval/construction process. Cutting corners is problematic when building a house -- it's ridiculous with a complex facility that could inflict unprecedented social and economic devastation. Also, pursuing new reactors leaves ratepayers and investors vulnerable to tenfold cost overruns, as with earlier plants.

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of nuclear power is the industry's control over the NRC, politicians, and too often the media. As the Union of Concerned Scientists' David Lochbaum says, "The NRC's priority is on the financial health of the nuclear industry, not on public safety."

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Due to dangers and poor economics, many assume Progress Energy and Duke Energy won't really go forward with their recently suggested new nuclear plants. But the first reactors built would receive most of the multi-billion dollar subsidies sought under the Bush/Cheney energy bill.

Both companies' plants rank high in problems. Progress proposes another reactor at Shearon Harris, but its existing one is among the nation's most troubled -- with 11 cooling system failures since 2003, a near-worst record on fire protection violations, plus one of the largest U.S. stockpiles of high-level waste. Brunswick's system failures placed it on this year's NRC watch-list. Duke's Oconee plant lost 10,000 gallons of waste pool water one day last fall.

Industry's greatest propaganda coup is the well-entrenched misconception that economical, clean energy is "years away." Experts have long proven that reducing electricity usage -- using current technologies -- can balance demand sufficiently to allow a full transition to renewable energy within a decade. Cutting the 50 percent of electricity now wasted can immediately begin reducing greenhouse gases and air pollution, while saving ratepayers billions. One estimate is that every dollar spent on energy efficiency is seven times more beneficial than one spent on nuclear power.

Such a transition requires genuine leaders to break free from the utilities' multi-faceted influence. The state's residents -- who grant these corporations their charters, and even monopoly markets -- must reassert democratic decision-making at this crucial juncture.

North Carolina needs a modern energy policy, not a nuclear relapse.

(Jim Warren is executive director of N.C. WARN, the Waste Awareness & Reduction Network.)

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