

The News & Observer

Published August 5, 2001

Safer? Cheaper? Hardly

by Jim Warren

For three years, NC WARN has worked to minimize risks from storage of irradiated fuel rods -- high-level waste -- at CP&L's nuclear plants. Now I've been asked to address the revival of nuclear power.

Despite claims that nuclear power is "emissions free," research in Europe and the U.S. suggests that routine radioactive releases into air and water are damaging health near nuclear plants. Furthermore, human-produced radiation accumulating in our environment is linked to thousands of cancer deaths in the general population. Also, pollution from nuclear fuel processing is a leading contributor to ozone depletion, while uranium mining causes extensive health and environmental damage.

Each nuclear plant has the potential to release enough radioactivity to kill thousands of people and contaminate entire states from a reactor meltdown or high-level waste fire. The probability of such an industrial disaster is incalculable.

While industry propagates the myth that reactors are safer than ever, the evacuation signs and beacons within 10 miles of plants are there for good reason. The public rarely hears about frequent mishaps, some releasing radiation; some narrowly avoiding catastrophe. Risks increase as radiation-bombarded components age, causing equipment failures and forced shutdowns at eight plants since year 2000 – including a regional emergency in New York after a steam generator tube ruptured.

No wonder utilities are seeking license extensions years ahead of time to preempt controversy from future safety problems. The insurance industry won't gamble on nuclear plants, and Congress exempts utilities from liability. If disaster strikes, you could lose health and home.

The greatest chance of a reactor or waste-pool disaster is an act of sabotage or insanity. Despite an NRC program finding nearly half of U.S. plants unable to prevent a reactor meltdown caused by mock-terrorists, the NRC is moving to allow plant owners to conduct their own (cheaper) exercises. This despite June testimony by a convicted terrorist connected to Osama bin Laden that power plants are primary targets.

We might escape the Nuclear Age without another disaster, but there's no disposal solution in sight for the high-level waste rods – hazardous for 10,000 years – with which the industry gambles by packing into high-density pools. The long-tested, multi-billion dollar Yucca Mountain repository fails federal safety rules, resulting in government contractors recommending political maneuvers to force the site's approval. [More →](#)

When included in cost comparisons, plant decommissioning and waste management make nuclear energy even less competitive, while taxpayers bear these costs thanks to industry's

campaign-financed congressional allies. Massive nuclear money poured into politics maintains a dangerous level of control over the NRC, and the agency's closed door is becoming sealed shut as it abolishes public hearings. The millions CP&L spent on lawyers and public relations to stifle scientific and civic debate on its waste expansion is standard industry practice.

After a trillion-dollar taxpayer subsidy, nuclear delivers little more U.S. energy than does wood – and globally is outpaced several-fold by renewable energy – even while promoters continue the false argument that our only choices are nuclear or highly polluting coal. Wind power is the fastest growing energy source on earth, and efficient lighting could single-handedly replace U.S. nuclear output.

But our society's power usage is embarrassingly wasteful, while we seem oblivious to the resulting health and environmental damage. The "growth-at-any-cost" fever driving our economic policies has already exceeded ecological sustainability.

Desperate for a nuclear revival, financially vested proponents are effusively touting new reactor designs (and more subsidies) despite serious uncertainties that have already emerged during their conceptual phase.

We're stuck with nuclear power for now – and thousands of tons of essentially permanent waste. It will be interesting to see if the spin-masters and lobbying money will again fool the public with this dangerous and unnecessary technology.

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