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Oldest US nuclear reactor: a 'disaster' in waiting?



by Karin Zeitvogel - Thu Mar 24, 3:52 pm ET



AFP/File - An aerial view of the Oyster Creek Generating Station, a nuclear power plant in Forked River, New Jersey ...

LACEY, New Jersey (AFP) - A sleepy New Jersey town has popped onto people's radar screens because it has the oldest running nuclear power plant in the United States -- and, some say, the most dangerous.

Named for a Revolutionary War general, Lacey is the kind of American town that few from outside the seaside settlement knew much about before the earthquake and tsunami in Japan triggered a nuclear crisis.

Down the road from the 1950s-style diner and across from the bridge that locals use as a fishing pier stands the Oyster Creek nuclear plant.

It uses a GE Mark I Boiling Water reactor identical to those that lost power at Japan's Fukushima plant in the March 11 earthquake and then was struck by a tsunami that knocked out its backup generators, causing reactor cooling functions to fail.

US anti-nuclear activists and many residents of Lacey and surrounding Jersey shore townships worry that a similar nuclear disaster could happen at Oyster Creek, and it wouldn't need an earthquake or tsunami to trigger it.

Oyster Creek has been dogged by problems including a corroding liner in the carbon steel containment unit; leaks that allow radioactive tritium to seep into drinking water; and huge volumes of stocked spent fuel rods.

"We have 40 years of radiation on site -- two-and-a-half to three times more than in Japan," anti-nuclear activist Jeff Brown told AFP.

"You also have that tremendously stupid design to start with where the spent fuel rods are sitting on top of the reactor," he said, raising a fear among residents that the reactor could be an easy target for a terrorist attack.

"At the very least, we need a no-fly zone over Oyster Creek. We have a no-fly zone over Disney World but not here," said Peggi Sturfels, a program organizer at the New Jersey Environmental Federation.

Oyster Creek is owned and operated by Exelon Corporation, which employs 700 people at the plant. The company disputes the charges by activists, insisting the reactor is safe.

"Nuclear power stations in general are the most hardened and well-protected industrial facilities in existence. Oyster Creek is no exception," Exelon spokesman Craig Nesbitt told AFP.

Half a million people live within what would be the evacuation zone if Oyster Creek were ever to have a radiation accident. In the summer, the population swells with beach-goers heading to the Jersey shore.

The town is 85 miles (137 kilometers) south of New York and 55 miles (88 kilometers) east of Philadelphia.

New Jersey is not in a seismically active zone but meteorologists say the coastal state is long overdue for a Category Five hurricane.

"One good storm surge, and Oyster Creek's backup generators are swamped. It's Japan all over again," Sturfels said.

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Nesbitt rejects such assessments, saying the plant is five miles (eight kilometers) off the Atlantic coast, protected by barrier islands, and 23 feet (seven meters) above sea level, far higher than the largest recorded storm tide of seven feet, in 1962.

He also said Oyster Creek "is constantly evaluated and improved," and that more than \$1 billion has been spent on plant upgrades since operations began in 1969.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission extended Oyster Creek's license for another 20 years in 2009.

The NRC not only gives out nuclear licenses but is the industry safety watchdog. That's a conflict of interest, say critics who liken the situation to the regulation of the oil industry prior to last year's devastating Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

Under pressure from state officials, Oyster Creek's license was rolled back to 10 years, and the plant is now due to close for good in 2019.

Even that's too late, say some residents.

"I don't like it. They should close it sooner," retiree Barbara Murrofsky told AFP as she shopped at a local hardware store.

"What's happening in Japan has made us more aware of the problems we have in our own backyard," she said. "There are so many people who live near here that an accident would be a major disaster. They should shut it down now."

But another local, Rick Gifford, looked philosophically at Oyster Creek.

"It's been running for 40 years with no problem, there's no reason it should start having problems now," he said.

Greg Auriemma, a lawyer for the Sierra Club environmental group, said Gifford's stance was not unusual in Lacey.

"There's a sense of complacency because while the plant has had a lot of negative publicity, no major disaster has occurred. So people look at it and say, 'It's been running for 40 years, what's the big deal?'"

But, Auriemma said, as Japan showed, one tragic event can dramatically change the situation. "There's a potential disaster that could happen right here in our backyard," he told AFP.

Last week, President Barack Obama ordered a "comprehensive review" of US nuclear safety and vowed to learn lessons from Japan's atomic accident.

The NRC on Wednesday launched its review of the nation's 24 US reactors, saying a full report and recommendations will be published in six months.

A federal court hearing a case brought in 2009 by environmental groups against the NRC on Monday asked the nuclear watchdog to advise if Japan's unfolding crisis impacted "the propriety" of renewing Oyster Creek's license.

On the same day, the NRC extended for 20 years the license of another Mark 1 reactor, in the state of Vermont.

The Vermont Yankee reactor has had tritium leaks, a cooling tower collapse and even a fire in the plant's transformer.

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L Aw 2 hours ago | [Report Abuse](#)

46 2

I really question why we always make public any target we think could be hit ..

[Replies \(6\)](#)

YAVOLL 2 hours ago | [Report Abuse](#)

36 1

Spent fuel has been a problem for 20 years.
Immigration has been a problem foe 25 years.
Health care has been a problem for 30 years.
Unemployment, jobs and industry leaving, drugs, rotting innerstructure.

So what the hell has Congress been doing?????????????????????????????
Running their mouth, taking care of themselves, sitting on their @#%\$.
RE-ELECT NO ONE.

[Replies \(2\)](#)

Lucky 3 hours ago | [Report Abuse](#)

71 7

"We have 40 years of radiation on site". This pretty much explains the snooki.

[Replies \(7\)](#)

John 5 hours ago | [Report Abuse](#)

110 13

Maybe, just maybe, someone should ask the US Navy how to run reactors. Ya think?

[Replies \(16\)](#)

Jim S 2 hours ago | [Report Abuse](#)

13 0

i think that all of the people who receive their power from the reactor should. start using coal oil for lighting and the women could forage for sticks and dry grass for heating and cooking. then you can shut the reactor down. problem solved.

[Reply](#)

Fred 3 hours ago | [Report Abuse](#)

106 16

This articles sole intent was to instill fear, but was researched poorly. There is no such thing as a GE Mark I reactor. Mark I is the type of containment. Oyster Creek has a BWR/2 while Fukushima does not have any BWR/2s. Everyone has been throwing around these terms lately, but have no idea what they mean.

[Replies \(15\)](#)

Laszlo 2 hours ago | [Report Abuse](#)

28 3

If you take every death, every environmental incident, even every worst case scenario hypothetical future problem, nuclear power is still cleaner, safer and more efficient than any other power source currently available. Coal plants release levels of radioactive contamination that would be completely unacceptable at any nuclear plant. The environmental damage of coal mining, oil and gas drilling etc. is far greater than that of the nuclear plants even accounting for pitchblende mining (which is admittedly pretty nasty). Radiation is scary. You can't see it, feel it or smell it. But you can understand it, and if you do, and you understand the risks involved with traditional power sources, its pretty hard to justify the anti-nuclear sentiment.

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Cary 3 hours ago | [Report Abuse](#)

50 8

"highest rated" should be eliminated as a catagory.

[Replies \(2\)](#)

Randy S 2 hours ago | [Report Abuse](#)

14 1

in france almost all of their energy is nuclear generated. their nuclear waste only amounts to the size of one penny per citizen of france. pretty impressive; especially since they take other countries nuclear waste and renew it. maybe we could learn something from them.

[Replies \(2\)](#)

Hedgehog 7 hours ago | [Report Abuse](#)

75 15

If you're REALLY concerned about your local nuclear reactor then don't use your AC this summer. That will lighten the load and lessen the chance of an accident. I assume you've already turned your winter temps down and switched to the twisty light bulbs, of course.

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