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The NRC and Nuclear Power Plant Safety in 2010

A Brighter Spotlight Needed

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The crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in Japan following the March 11 earthquake and tsunami is a stark reminder of the risks inherent in nuclear power. One of its consequences has been heightened concern about the safety of nuclear power facilities in the United States.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the federal agency responsible for ensuring that U.S. nuclear plants are operated as safely as possible, gets mixed reviews in a March 2011 UCS report, *The NRC and Nuclear Power Plant Safety in 2010: A Brighter Spotlight Needed*. The report—the first of an annual series—was prepared and scheduled for release before the crisis in Japan began to unfold, but the disaster makes the report’s conclusions more timely than ever.

Authored by UCS nuclear engineer David Lochbaum, the report examines 14 “near-misses” at U.S. nuclear plants during 2010 and evaluates the NRC response in each case. The events exposed a variety of shortcomings, such as inadequate training, faulty maintenance, poor design, and failure to investigate problems thoroughly.

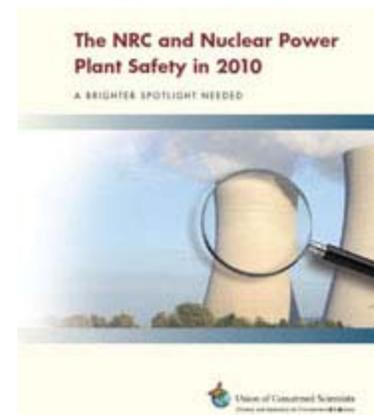
Since NRC inspections cannot reveal more than a fraction of the problems that exist, it is crucial for the agency to respond effectively to the problems it does find. The report offers examples of both effective and ineffective responses:

Effective

Oconee. NRC inspectors averted a possible safety problem by refusing to accept plant operators’ rationale for allowing a component in Units 2 and 3 to go untested after a similar component in Unit 1 had failed.

Browns Ferry. Inspectors’ probing questions about an oil leak prompted a fruitful “recalibration” of plant workers’ thinking and led to the recall of a potentially defective part used in multiple U.S. reactors.

Kewaunee. Inspectors noticed a subtle, longstanding issue in the plant’s procedures for routine testing of pumps and valves that could have produced a safety problem if an accident had occurred during testing.



Ineffective

Peach Bottom. Workers slowed down control rod testing to evade regulations that would have required a plant shutdown; NRC inspectors were aware of the problem but failed to address it adequately.

Indian Point. Inspectors documented that the liner of the refueling cavity had been leaking since 1993; NRC management chose to ignore the problem.

Vermont Yankee. The NRC ignored regulations requiring that all releases of radioactively contaminated air be via controlled and monitored pathways—regulations that had been grounds for shutting down a Baton Rouge plant two years previously.

Lessons learned

The chances of a disaster at a nuclear power plant are low—and current events remind us how important it is to keep them that way. The new report shows that the NRC is capable of functioning as a highly effective watchdog, but also makes clear that much work remains to be done before the agency can fulfill that role as consistently as the public has a right to expect.

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