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Nuclear Watchdog Groups Raise Reactor Safety Concerns over the Gulf Oil Spill

Nuclear power watchdog groups are calling for an across-the-board and transparent analysis of all critical actions which will be necessary to prevent damage to coastal reactors posed by the threat of contaminated water. In a letter to the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the US Coast Guard, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Department of Homeland Security, the watchdog groups ask for assurances that comprehensive guidance from federal agencies is being provided to reactor licensees. They are also calling for the constant monitoring of the oil plumes.

If surface or submerged oil contaminated water were to infiltrate the water intake system serious damage to safety systems could result. Nuclear plants have procedures to shut down in advance of water contamination events to prevent such damage. Such a shutdown event did happen on the Delaware River in November 2004 when an oil tanker spilled 265,000 gallons of crude oil near Philadelphia PA. The Salem NJ nuclear plant shutdown its reactors for nearly two weeks as a precaution against the submerged oil.

The unprecedented nature of this problem is especially concerning because there are now “thousands of smaller spills”¹ which must be accounted for. The ever-changing currents in the Gulf create a very difficult situation for the tracking of the plumes compared to the Delaware River spill.

Furthermore, BP states that the underwater oil plumes don't exist, contrary to independent scientists' analysis. This type of confusion must be resolved with an accountable federal agency and a notification process for the encroachment of underwater and surface oil plumes to coastal waters, especially near nuclear power plants.

"BP is disputing that underwater oil plumes are spreading throughout the Gulf region," said Paul Gunter, Director of the Reactor Oversight Project for the Takoma Park, MD based organization Beyond Nuclear. "It is vital that an NRC safety analysis be made public before coastal reactors take in billions of gallons of oil-contaminated water."

¹ As described by Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen in a June 7th 2010 press conference.

Scott Portzline of Three Mile Island Alert, Harrisburg PA said, “I have not seen any communiqués or guidance from the NRC alerting the plants to the unprecedented nature of the threat posed by the multiple sub-surface oil plumes. Therefore, reactor operators might be caught off guard if they are relying on their prior limited experience with oil slicks.”

An additional concern is that chemical dispersants and elevated methane gas levels in the Gulf sea water might cause problems with reactor safety systems. Consequently, a full and transparent accounting of all factors must be acted upon.

Norm Cohen, Coordinator for the Unplug Salem Campaign said, “We are urging the NRC to clearly document what actions and contingency plans it will employ in response to this crisis. We want to know how the various response agencies are interacting right now.”

The letter containing the concerns and questions for the federal agencies is attached.

Note: link - Overhead photo of [Crystal River nuclear power plant intake canals](#).

In September 2009 the plant was temporarily shutdown to replace aging steam generators. During the repairs, workers discovered a crack in the concrete containment building. The reactor remains shutdown.

June 14, 2010

U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission

One White Flint North
11555 Rockville Pike
Rockville, MD 20852-2738

Re: Gulf oil spill and reactor safety

Dear Secretary of the NRC,

We are looking for assurances that the proper federal and state agencies are working in a coordinated and comprehensive effort to prevent safety problems at coastal nuclear plants which could be caused by the Gulf oil spill. Thus far, there has been no guidance from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to its reactor licensees. The NRC has not yet designated an officer or a task force to handle a response plan for this event. Therefore, as concerned citizens we would like to know what is being done. The process should be made publicly transparent to allay concerns.

Additionally, we want to be assured that surface and submerged oil plumes are being monitored before they near a reactor site. If oil contaminated water were to infiltrate the water intake system, serious damage to safety systems could result.

Nuclear plants have procedures to shut down in advance of water contamination events to prevent such damage. Of course this relies upon proper tracking of the plumes.

Such a shut-down event did happen on the Delaware River in November 2004 when an oil tanker spilled 265,000 gallons of crude oil near Philadelphia PA. The Salem NJ nuclear plant shutdown its reactors for nearly two weeks as a precaution against the submerged oil.

In that event, the Coast Guard did not have the phone number for the nuclear plant and instead mistakenly called the Unplug Salem nuclear watchdog chairman at his home in the middle of the night.

We would like to be certain that no one is caught off guard.

We would like to know:

- Who is monitoring the sub-surface oil plumes?
- Can special monitoring resources be set up at the Crystal River nuclear plant, and potentially reactors on the Atlantic Coast of Florida?
- How are nuclear plants protecting themselves from the oil, chemical dispersants and dissolved methane now in the sea water?
- What guidance is the NRC providing?
- Has the NRC asked for assistance from NOAA's National Ocean Service to specifically monitor the behavior and movement of the oil, chemicals and methane near the nuclear plants?
- What federal and state agencies are involved in a coordinated effort?

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Cc:

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