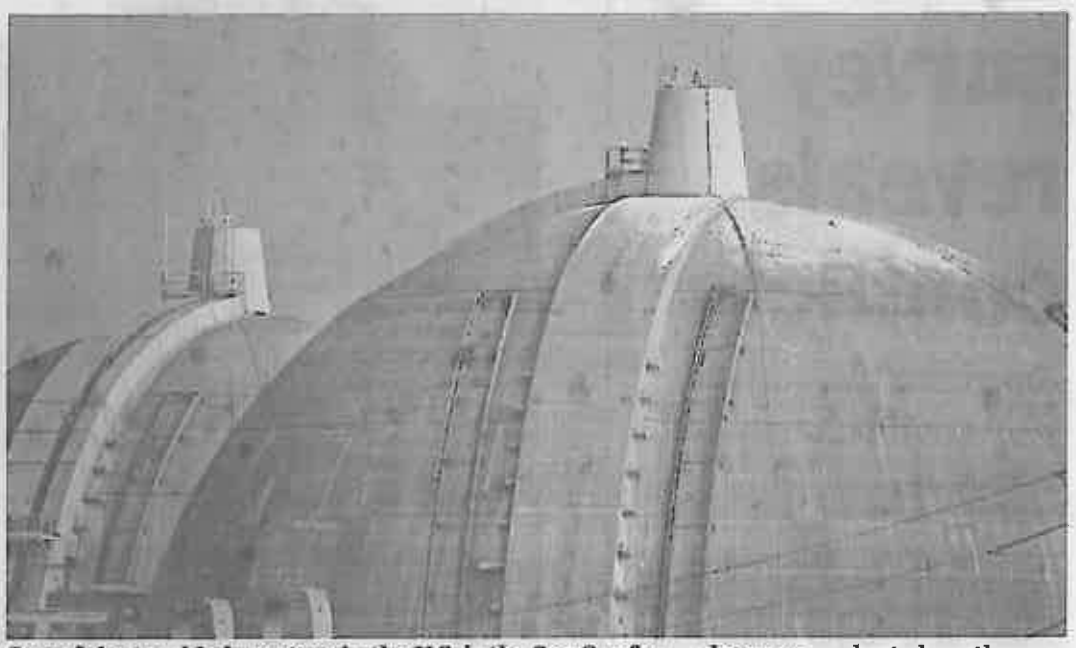
2 years after Japan, report calls US nuke plants safer

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Associated Press



One of the troubled reactors in the U.S. is the San Onofre nuclear power plant along the Pacific Ocean coastline. In early 2012, a tiny radiation leak led to the discovery of damage to hundreds of tubes that carry radioactive water. AP

WASHINGTON Two years after the nuclear crisis in Japan, the top U.S. regulator says American nuclear power plants are safer than ever, though not trouble-free. A watchdog group calls that assessment overly rosy.

"The performance is quite good," Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chairman Allison Macfarlane said in an interview with The Associated Press.

All but five of the nation's 104 nuclear reactors were performing at acceptable safety levels at the end of 2012, Macfarlane said, citing a recent NRC report. "You can't engage that many reactors and not have a few that are going to have difficulty," she said.

SCIENTISTS BLAST REPORT, CALL NRC LAX

But the watchdog group, the Union of Concerned Scientists, has issued a scathing report saying nearly one in six U.S. nuclear reactors experienced safety breaches last year, due in part to weak oversight. The group accused the NRC of "tolerating the intolerable."

Using the agency's own data, the scientists group said 14 serious incidents, ranging from broken or impaired safety equipment to a cooling water leak, were reported last year. Over the past three years, 40 of the 104 U.S. reactors experienced one or more serious safety-related incidents that required additional action by the NRC, the report said.

"The NRC has repeatedly failed to enforce essential safety regulations," wrote David Lochbaum, director of the group's Nuclear Safety Project and author of the study. "Failing to enforce existing safety regulations is literally a gamble that places lives at stake."

NRC officials disputed the report and said none of the reported incidents harmed workers or the public.

JAPAN DISASTER MARKS 2ND ANNIVERSARY

Monday marks the second anniversary of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that crippled Japan's Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant. U.S. regulators, safety advocates and the industry are now debating whether safety changes imposed after the disaster have made the nation's 65 nuclear plants safer.

New rules imposed by the NRC require plant operators to install or improve venting systems to limit core damage in a serious accident and set up sophisticated equipment to monitor water levels in pools of spent nuclear fuel.

The plants also must improve protection of safety equipment installed after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks and make sure they can handle damage to multiple reactors at the same time.

Macfarlane, who took over as NRC chairwoman last July, said U.S. plants are operating safely and are making progress on the new rules, which impose a deadline for completion of 2016 — five years after the Fukushima disaster. "So far, industry seems to be cooperating," she said.

JAPAN, EU REQUIRE FILTERS

Even before the new rules are completely in place, the NRC is considering a new regulation related to the Japan disaster: requiring nuclear operators to spend tens of millions of dollars to install filtered vents at two dozen reactors.

NRC staff recommended the filters as a way to prevent radioactive particles from escaping into the atmosphere after a core meltdown. The filters are required in Japan and throughout much of Europe, but U.S. utilities say they are unnecessary and expensive.

SOME IN AMERICA PROBLEMATIC

The U.S. nuclear energy industry faces a range of difficulties.

» Problem-plagued plants in Florida and Wisconsin are slated for closure, and four other reactors remain offline because of safety concerns.

» Shut-down reactors include two at the beleaguered San Onofre nuclear power plant in Southern California, which hasn't produced electricity since January 2012, when a tiny radiation leak led to the discovery of damage to hundreds of tubes that carry radioactive water.