

How safe is nuclear safety?

Three Mile Island; is it safe now?

WASHINGTON (AP) — About 4,300 safety changes have been made at atomic power plants since the Three Mile Island accident. But critics contend the changes don't go far enough to make nuclear power safer.

Some critics say the industry made only the easy, cheap changes and not the difficult, most important improvements.

Officials overseeing the industry acknowledge that a dozen of the 198 fixes given the highest priority after the March 28, 1979, TMI accident have fallen more than a year behind schedule.

Harold Denton, whose calm defused the panic four years ago at Harrisburg, Pa., said he was too optimistic about how fast regulators could turn around an industry with 65 nuclear utilities, four reactor makers, a dozen architect-engineers and thousands of subcontractors.

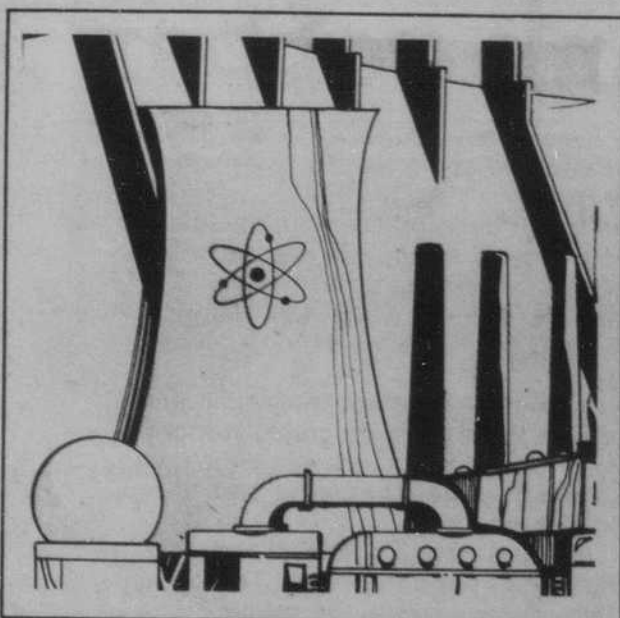
"It's not as though we're NASA, buying our own space shuttle where we've got control over everything that goes into it," said Denton, director of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation. "We have to develop a technical basis for a requirement and see how it fits in every plant before we issue it."

It was not until three months ago, for example, that the last of the nation's 76 nuclear plants with operating licenses finished putting in gauges that tell operators the level of water in the reactor containment. Had the operators at TMI had such a gauge, they would not have wrongly assumed the reactor was safely covered with water.

Instead, TMI operators cut off an emergency system feeding water to the reactor, thus allowing the unit to overheat, damaging its core and releasing radioactivity into the atmosphere.

"The plants are a heck of a lot safer now than they would have been if Three Mile Island had not occurred," Denton said. "TMI was the impetus to force a lot of changes."

Following its own investigation into the



Emerald graphic

accident and one by a presidential commission, the NRC came up with what Denton called a "wish list" of 349 items to make nuclear plants safer.

That list of 6,000 specific tasks is the basis for most of the safety changes. The NRC says 72 percent of those tasks were completed, at an average cost in older plants of \$65 million each.

While conceding there have been some changes, critics contend they have been too few and too slow in coming. Further, they assert, the industry and the NRC have dwelled upon the easy fixes.

"They've applied the Band-Aids, but many improvements in power plant design and operation that were identified during the TMI post-mortems have yet to be implemented," said safety engineer Robert Pollard, a former NRC staffer with the anti-nuclear Union of Concerned Scientists.

There also is a perception that the NRC is devoting too much time to the Reagan administration's efforts to bolster the ailing industry with licensing changes to make it easier to build plants.

Portlanders reluctant to evacuate

PORTLAND (AP) — Two-thirds of Portland's residents don't think the city should participate in plans to evacuate citizens in the event of a nuclear attack, according to a Bardsley & Haslacher Inc. poll.

About one-quarter of those responding to the survey commissioned by The Oregonian newspaper felt the city should take part in a federal program to relocate Portlanders to outlying areas and shelter a large population for up to two weeks. Another 14 percent were undecided. The poll's findings were reported in a copyright story in the Oregonian's Sunday editions.

The Portland Nuclear Civil Preparedness Planning Task Force is to consider the poll's findings in delivering a report to the City Council in two weeks. Current plans call for the report to urge that the city not participate in relocation plans for nuclear war.

"I'm very impressed with the size of the popular opposition in this city," said Dr. Charles Schade, Multnomah County health officer and chairman of the task force. "I was a little surprised to see the results so lopsided."

"I think the reason is the exact wording of the question. Other polls in Portland and elsewhere have shown general support for civil

defense planning."

The poll sampled a 292-person cross section of the Portland public from Feb. 18 to March 3. The poll has a maximum range of error of 5.9 percent. Those surveyed were over 18 and were asked whether Portland should have a nuclear-attack relocation plan.

A poll conducted last July and August by Intercept Research Corp. came to a different conclusion than the Bardsley/Haslacher poll. In the earlier poll, respondents were asked whether the city should have a plan for civil defense or a nuclear disaster. Fifty-eight percent of the 1,200 persons surveyed thought Portland should have a plan, 36 percent opposed a plan and 6 percent were undecided. That poll had an 8 percent maximum range of error.

Dean Bollon, president of Intercept Research, said the differing results of the two polls may be due to the fact that the questions were slightly different.

"I think maybe the Bardsley question is perhaps more direct..." he said, noting that it concentrated on nuclear attack as opposed to disaster or accident. "And there's been a considerable amount of press and conversation about the nuclear issue since August when that (the first poll) was taken."



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