

Technology poses biggest threat of nuclear accidents, panel says

By Tom Hill
Of the Emerald

The Chernobyl nuclear mishap itself poses little danger to Americans, but the larger issue of potential future accidents is a much graver concern, members of a panel discussion said Thursday night.

Two University faculty members, biology Professor Aaron Novick and sociology Professor Steve Johnson, participated in the discussion at the Eugene Clinic.

Johnson stressed that no nuclear power plant is risk-free. He said accidents are generally — and wrongly — blamed on human error.

"(The accidents) are not really operator error — they happen because the systems interact with human beings," he said. "I think we ought to blame the accidents on the state of technology."

He explained that the more technologically advanced the plants are, the higher the chances of accidents due to un-



Steve Johnson

predictability and because the large number of components within the systems means more opportunities for failure. To get the chance of accidents down to reasonable levels, he said, each component of a plant would have to have only a one in 10 billion chance of failure.

Johnson said the only way to get an accurate idea of the chances of an accident is to examine historical data. "We're at the beginning of the learning curve" as far as accident rates are concerned, he said.

Novick, who participated in the Manhattan Project that created the first atomic bomb, lamented what he sees as the public's lack of understanding of the hazards of nuclear power and weapons.

"Little has changed," he said. "We're living on the edge of a precipice."

Novick told the story of how a nuclear power plant was almost built in Eugene in 1968. Although 80 percent of the voters approved bonds to build the plant, the move was eventually defeated after a grassroots group rallied against it, he said. That group, he noted, was made up largely of housewives, and he urged the audience of about 50 people to educate themselves and become involved as the earlier group did.

Novick said mankind is showing "a striking disregard for the future" by the way it is pursuing nuclear power and weapons production, and added, "I find that human memories are rather short."

Johnson expressed concern about the possibility of nuclear plants being bombed if war breaks out. While the worst

possible accident at a plant would contaminate about 1,800 square miles of land, and a one-megaton nuclear bomb would contaminate 20,000 square miles, a bomb that size hitting a nuclear power plant would affect 64,000 square miles, he said.

Johnson joined Novick in urg-



Aaron Novick

ing the audience members to involve themselves in the nuclear debate.

"Chernobyl should be a warning to us," he said. "Accidents will happen; we just can't tell how often. But I can tell you, they won't be every 10,000 years. They probably won't even be every 10; they'll happen more often than that."

Boedigheimer summarized his office's studies of radiation levels in Oregon groundwater, milk, vegetation and air after the Chernobyl accident occurred April 26. He said most traces of radiation began showing up from about May 6-13, but that the only area serious enough for his department to issue precautions on was groundwater.

Police beat

The following is a list of University-area crimes reported to the Eugene Police Department since May 22:

A Ford flatbed truck parked at 1679 Agate St. was vandalized May 20 when an unknown suspect removed six lug bolts from the left rear wheel. About \$360 damage resulted to the vehicle when the driver started to drive away. The crime was reported May 22.

A female student observed a male masturbating by a Lawrence Hall sculpting studio May 23. The student was working in the studio when she heard rustling and noticed the suspect exposing himself outside. He is described as a white male about 30 years old, 5 feet 8 inches tall, 140 pounds, with black hair. He was wearing a black nylon jacket and blue jeans.

A fire in a garbage can at the University Inn apparently was started by a cigarette butt Saturday at about 7 p.m. The fire was extinguished without causing any damage, police said.

Two chairs were thrown off the third floor balcony of the EMU Monday at about 7 p.m. The chairs were recovered by the EMU Child Care Center. Damage was estimated at \$90.

A cassette player valued at \$200 and a wristwatch valued at \$300 were stolen from a University Inn dormitory room Wednesday at about 2:15 p.m.

A wallet and contents valued at \$10 were stolen from a women's restroom in the Education Building Wednesday at about 3 p.m.

Ten bicycles were reported stolen; one was found.

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