PRESS RELEASE

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Safe Energy Groups Call Out Lax Nuclear Oversight During Pandemic

Nuclear power plants appear to be sites of COVID-19 super-spreader events, but government regulators are ignoring the problem. So says a coalition of safe-energy advocates who have been tracking the situation. The groups obtained copies of social media reports by workers at one plant, describing unsafe working conditions, over 200 COVID infection cases, multiple hospitalizations, at least one death, fears for their safety, and a lack of concern by corporate management.

As the nation begins to experience the expected second surge in the COVID-19 pandemic, the coalition is calling for federal action to address coronavirus risks on nuclear sites, and the pandemic's impacts on the safety and security of the nation's 94 operating nuclear reactors. They have addressed these concerns in a list of recommendations which they provided members of Congress and state officials, urging immediate action.

"The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has utterly failed to do its job during this pandemic," asserts Tim Judson, director of the Nuclear Information and Resource Service (NIRS) in Takoma Park, MD. **"The Agency has refused to undertake any measures to protect workers from the coronavirus, and has not even required the industry to report COVID infection rates. All we know is what concerned workers are reporting, and it is alarming. Congress must act now to prevent more COVID-19 outbreaks in nuclear power plants."**

The urgency for action on these recommendations was highlighted as reports of COVID-positive nuclear plant workers from reactor sites around the country came in. At one reactor site earlier this year – Fermi unit-2 outside of Detroit, operated by Detroit Edison – over 240 workers reportedly tested positive. Private Facebook posts from workers at the site spoke of "worse conditions I've ever experienced," and questioned "just how hell can you maintain social distancing, constantly cleaning hands, and keep mask on all the time during an outage at a nuke plant."

Several other nuclear sites have had similar reports of high COVID infection rates: over 800 workers at the Vogtle reactor construction site in Georgia; 89 workers at the Grand Gulf Nuclear Station in Mississippi; and dozens of quarantined workers at the Limerick Nuclear Generating Station in Pennsylvania. In stark and unexplained contrast, the Salem Nuclear Power Plant, operated by PSEG Nuclear in New Jersey, reportedly conducted outage work in the spring with no positives for COVID. The true extent of coronavirus spread within the industry is unknown because NRC has not required any reporting or protective measures.

Nuclear reactors require non-stop monitoring and maintenance. In addition they need to replenish part of the nuclear fuel needed for the heat-producing chain-reaction every 18 months to two years. When these operations occur, it is not uncommon for 800-1,200 temporary workers and contractors from all over the country to descend on a reactor site for weeks at a time to conduct the maintenance and refueling.

"The refueling and maintenance operations needed to keep nuclear reactors up to safety standards also mean that hundreds of out-of-state workers will be coming to states trying

desperately to contain the COVID pandemic through quarantines, partial lock-downs, and other means of keeping people from close contact with each other. These conditions are near impossible to achieve during such work outages," Paul Gunter, reactor oversight project manager at Beyond Nuclear in Takoma Park, MD, points out.

While recognized as a serious concern by the NRC, the agency tasked with insuring the safety and health of the public and the environment from radiation hazards, the agency has taken a direction of allowing nuclear plant operators to skip some maintenance and training activities to reduce the possibility of increased COVID infection at the reactors.

"Using nuclear power puts us on the horns of a serious health and safety dilemma," observes David Kraft, director of the Chicago-based Nuclear Energy Information Service (NEIS). **"If the current COVID outbreak worsens, or becomes 'cyclic to permanent' as some experts warn, nuclear utilities and regulators will be forced to regularly choose between spreading the pandemic by bringing workers from out of state into areas of quarantine to keep the reactors operating, or eroding safety by skipping maintenance and training exercises to observe regional quarantines. Neither is a desirable choice,"** Kraft warns.

"Because the NRC has a long and well-documented history of ignoring public input, we are turning to Congress for quick and more assertive action," NIRS' Judson points out. **"If during the pandemic these reactors cannot be operated safely and according to existing regulations without constantly moving regulatory goalposts, then to protect the public they must be shut down unless and until they can be,"** Judson asserts.

The safe-energy groups agree that three immediate action steps must be taken:

1. Orders from governors and state agencies with pre-emptive authority on the issues of public health should be respected and deferred to in responding to orders for quarantine, isolation and lockdown during the COVID pandemic. Federal regulatory agencies and nuclear utilities must coordinate their actions directly and transparently with state governments attempting to halt the spread of COVID in their respective states.

2. Calls for oversight:

   The appropriate House and Senate committees dealing with nuclear issues must convene hearings on "best practices" in dealing with nuclear facility operation during a COVID, or any kind of pandemic.

3. Get all Agencies to fully perform their mandates:

   The appropriate House and Senate committees dealing with nuclear issues must convene hearings to examine in detail the response of NRC and OSHA to the effects of the pandemic on operation of nuclear facilities, and the effects on local communities; and the Administration must require these agencies to fully discharge their official duties as current regulations stipulate.

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Examples of COVID-19 Concerns at U.S. Nuclear Reactors:

Workplace safety concerns:

Just as with the meat packing industry, reports of large numbers of workers being infected with COVID have emerged:

- Over 240 plant workers were reported to have tested positive at the Fermi 2 reactor outside of Detroit during its recent refueling outage, at least 12% of the workforce at the site. Private Facebook posts from workers spoke of "worse conditions I've ever experienced."
- Over 800 workers at the Vogtle reactor construction site in Georgia have tested positive, amounting to more than 10% of the 7,000-person workforce.
- At least 89 workers reportedly tested positive at the Grand Gulf Nuclear Station in Mississippi, by the end of April.
- It has been reported that first two case of COVID in Piketon Ohio, location of the Portsmouth Piketon Gaseous Diffusion Plant came from two workers at the Portsmouth plant. One of these workers was known for giving the COVID-19 to a family of seven. Piketon now has 10 deaths, and 761 reported cases.
- NRC has modified reactor staff work regulations to allow utilities to quarantine essential plant personnel onsite if necessary, and permit them to work *up to 84 hours per week over a 14 day period* – a recommendation advised as potentially dangerous by the guidelines of the National Safety Council, OSHA, and the CDC.

Community Safety concerns:

The small and typically rural communities surrounding nuclear plants have unique safety concerns:

- Because of their small size, local medical and hospital facilities are limited in their ability to deal with any major outbreaks.
- Hundreds of workers from out of state will be passing through, dining, shopping and lodging in these communities which will have limited screening, testing and contact-tracing abilities available to them – if these workers are even identified at all engaging in these activities.
- Even if transient workers are isolated at reactor sites, they will be passing through communities and interacting with the local population and economy.
- Pennsylvania State Senator Katie Muth said, "Thus far, Exelon has provided an inadequate pandemic response plan, withheld information from county and state officials, and failed to prioritize the safety of its employees, contract workers, community first responders, as well as all residents of the 44th senatorial district and entire region," Senator Muth wrote. "This is grossly irresponsible as Exelon has brought at least 1,400 workers to the epicenter of Pennsylvania's Covid-19 pandemic." *(Source: April 1, 2020 letter to Exelon management)*

Concerns with the current Regulatory Response:

The various federal agencies that would be most likely involved in dealing with COVID outbreaks relating to nuclear plants have responded in inconsistent and incomplete ways. Worse, they often seem content to foist seemingly safety-related responsibilities to other agencies, abdicating their own roles in reactor facility safety.

- To date there has been no assessment as to whether, in the midst of the pandemic, reactor emergency plans would suffice to limit the spread of radiation after a severe accident.

- No statistics are being kept by NRC regarding numbers of positive COVID-19 test results at reactors; the nuclear industry maintains a national database of nuclear maintenance workers, but has not made it available to track the movements of workers from plant to plant and health data such as date of last test and results.
- “NRC spokesperson Scott Burnell said that, the NRC's statutory authority only extends to protecting public health and safety ‘from radiological consequences, and that sets a boundary on our authority‘ and that ’OSHA’s [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] guidelines cover worker safety in regard to Covid-19.’” (*Nuclear Intelligence Weekly*, April 9, 2020). To date, OSHA has not indicated that it is tracking coronavirus impacts on the nuclear industry, and has provided no numbers as to the number of COVID positives at nuclear reactor sites.
- “As NRC and industry increase work hour limits for nuclear workers and defer reactor safety inspections, maintenance and repairs as social distancing precautions, emergency preparedness must be strengthened with compensatory measures for the increased risk to public safety,” said Paul Gunter of Beyond Nuclear. “Civilian populations in radiological evacuation planning zones (EPZ) are already sheltering-in-place from the viral threat,” he said. “Disaster medicine professionals, principally the American Thyroid Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, strongly recommend that reactor operators, federal and state civil defense authorities be required to provide everyone, particularly infants, young children and pregnant women, within the ten-mile reactor emergency planning zone radius with the immediate predistribution by ***direct*** delivery of potassium iodide (KI) tablets for the prophylactic protection from the radioactive iodine that would be released in a simultaneous severe nuclear accident,” he said.
- As of April 2020, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which in the US is the sole authority for determining the adequacy of offsite emergency plans and preparedness, has so far not conducted any emergency planning reviews for nuclear power plants to assess whether they would suffice in the event of a severe accident. Such reviews are required during a "pandemic outbreak" or when "other events occur or are anticipated that may impact the ability to effectively implement offsite EP plans and procedures," according to a longstanding memorandum of understanding (MOU) between NRC and FEMA, governing offsite emergency preparedness.