Coronavirus Hits the Nukes: Keep Your Fingers Crossed

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Nuclear power is uniquely vulnerable to global events such as hostilities, climate change and now, suddenly – pandemics. Worldwide, nations with nuclear power are finding themselves in emergency situations as the coronavirus spreads. Workers at the plants and in the control rooms are in close quarters. They are becoming ill. And the pool of people who are trained to do the specialized work is small.

Nuclear reactors (power plants) are at the same time vulnerable to a host of other unexpected events, such as flooding and loss of electricity to their sites.

And how do you do an emergency evacuation under pandemic conditions?

A number of US plants are mandated to be shut down in the next few months for refueling, maintenance, and repairs. Refueling brings in over 1,000 workers and specialists from all over the country to a site. What would the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), in charge of plant safety, do in this situation? Shut them down temporarily at the point of refueling, you say? Make their operators available for shortages at other sites? In most cases, electricity can be found elsewhere, and COVID-19 is **suppressing demand**.

Think again. Unbelievably, the NRC is saying that because there will not be enough people to do repair work, and that repairs would entail people working closely together, ***the plants will be allowed to go on operating past mandatory inspection deadlines and with skeleton crews.*** ***Repairs can also be deferred, and fatigued workers can be scheduled for up to 16-hour shifts.*** Ohio has 2 nuclear plants, Davis-Besse and Perry, both on Lake Erie.

In keeping with this decision, the NRC also has no plans to stop ***unnecessary*** nuclear functions during the coronavirus pandemic. These functions include decommissioning work on closed reactors and moving used fuel into dry cask storage. The latter is particularly problematic at the closed San Onofre Nuclear Station in California. There, Holtec thin-wall steel canisters (only 5/8-inch thick and holding over 50 tons) are being loaded into cavity enclosure containers with insufficient clearance to avoid gouging the walls of every canister. Earlier this year, **NRC fined Southern California Edison $116,000** for violating safety requirements relating to that fuel transfer. California is now a pandemic hotspot.

In response to little or no personal protective equipment at reactor sites, the nuclear industry is **lobbying for access to scarce equipment** needed by healthcare workers.

During the week of March 23, NRC held three telephone conferences with the public to explain their coronavirus plans. ***They are leaving it up to the nuclear industry to decide whether to close plants .*** When asked about reports that the industry is not enforcing social distancing, NRC responded “Not our job.” The same answer was given to questions on whether they coordinated with epidemiologists and operators of the electric grid. They say they are not responsible for epidemics and to contact OSHA, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Other callers were told to “ask the industry.” Dozens of callers were not heard as sessions were closed after 1&1/2 hours.

Corporate economic hardship? Nuclear utilities and the industry are now asking for economic and regulatory relief from the federal government. How is it that so many of our leaders, in both government and industry, do not understand that our economy is linked to the welfare of the people who run it? Perhaps that’s in keeping with their seeming lack of comprehension of the economic impact of a nuclear disaster. On top of a pandemic.

If the NRC is looking for the nuclear industry to do the right thing, even in their own economic interest, look at the Boeing 737 Max example. Even after 2 major crashes, the government had to step in and force Boeing to ground planes and cancel production of new ones.

The NRC allowed reactors to operate as the Fort Calhoun Nuclear Station flooded and as hurricanes threatened reactors on the East Coast. Maintenance waivers have been extended for as much as 10 years. Issues in a 2007 pandemic report were never addressed. And now the NRC is keeping the number of sick nuclear workers a secret.

Now, as in the past, the only real action taken by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is keeping their fingers crossed. And washing their hands of responsibility.

See the next page for stories on EPA suspending regulations due to the virus, and on a virus in India.

EPA suspends enforcement of environmental laws amid coronavirus

On March 26, 2020, the US EPA suspended enforcement of US environmental laws, citing the coronavirus pandemic. The suspension allows the EPA an out on monitoring as well, so there may not be a way to know for certain how bad pollution events are or were. This essentially gives an OK to pollute to the oil and gas industry (pipelines, fracking), coal plants, refineries, factories of all types, factory farms, sewage treatment plants and on and on. EPA has even given up authority to intervene in an active pollution catastrophe. And the order is open-ended.

Cynthia Giles, head of EPA's Office of Enforcement under Obama, called it an abdication of the agency's duty.

Lois Gibbs, Love Canal activist, noted in an April 9 article **EPA Just Gave polluters a License to Kill** that just last November EPA rolled back requirements on safety measures to prevent chemical releases, calling these regulations "burdensome," "costly," and "unnecessary." And without even minimal penalties, industry will have little motivation to stop polluting.

Powerful industries have put pressure on the EPA. The American Petroleum Institute (API) **asked for a suspension** of rules that require them to repair leaky equipment. Industries also asked for extensions to legal settlements and extensions to deadlines for meeting environmental goals.

In contrast, EPA has **refused to budge on deadlines** for comments as they proceed with deregulatory actions – even as scientists and environmentalists opposing these actions are being called away to address the coronavirus.

In another virus story: A virus attacks a nuclear power plant in India

On October 28, 2019, it was discovered that hackers had gained access to computers at India's largest nuclear power plant, the Kudankulam Nuclear Plant in Southern India. In December, **cybersecurity researchers found** that the attack was more sophisticated than originally thought. Vulnerability to viral attack largely involves how organizational leaders behave, such as in setting safety standards, limiting those with access to computers, and learning from failures. You don't have to stretch your imagination too far to picture how a virus could, deliberately or accidentally, initiate a global catastrophe.

With a population of 1.3 billion people, many living in crowded conditions -- and with limited health care facilities -- India is extremely vulnerable to the coronavirus.

The Kudankulam Nuclear Plant

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