

# Dangerous and Uncertain: Coronavirus and the Nuclear Industry

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Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

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*Accountability has always been a problem in the nuclear industry, despite praises to the contrary. Constantly keeping its muddled head above water with government handouts to remain competitive; ostensibly keeping a hand in the energy sector despite a sketchy record, there has always been a sense that “going nuclear” is a term that simply will not die.*

Even during the novel coronavirus crisis, those within the nuclear industry stressed their plumed credentials. The World Nuclear Association rosily [describes](#) the role of nuclear technologies in their use “to detect and fight the virus”. The body is insistent that nuclear reactors are to be celebrated for keeping the house in order as electricity supplies are maintained. Those operating reactors have also been considerate of their staff. “Reactor operators have taken steps to protect their workforce and have implemented business continuity plans to ensure the continuing functioning of key business activities where appropriate.” [According to a Forbes contributor](#), the industry “first developed pandemic response plans in 2006,” plans which were revised in March by the Nuclear Energy Institute to “align with the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended actions for COVID-19 as well as those of the World Health Organization.”

A good deal of this is deceptive. It is true that 2006 saw the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) broach the issue of pandemic threats to the industry, floating the possibility of having response plans. It duly [conducted a workshop](#) with the title theme “Sustaining Safe Nuclear Operations During an Influenza Pandemic”. This did not prove successful. As Edwin Lyman of the Union of Concerned Societies [noted](#),

“A number of difficult policy questions were discussed, including the potential need to sequester workers early in an outbreak and the effect of high rates of absenteeism. But little was done to resolve these questions.”

The Nuclear Energy Institute went so far as to recommend a Pandemic Licensing Plan for the NRC to review, recognising “the potential for an influenza epidemic to reduce nuclear plant staffing below the levels necessary to maintain full compliance with all NRC regulatory requirements”. The white paper [was intended](#) to balance “projected staffing reductions with the importance of continued operation to help maintain grid stability and provide reserve power to offset losses of other sources of generation.” Greater discretion in terms of enforcement on the part of the NRC was suggested, one that would square regulatory standards with the integrity of a continued system. More risk, in other words, might tolerated during a pandemic.

The [response](#) from the NRC was terse, finding that “without bounding entry conditions and more specific technical bases for the proposed regulatory relief, NEI’s approach still presents significant challenges that may prevent meaningful overall progress in pandemic preparation.”

Across the globe, nuclear power plants, and nuclear armed states, face critical issues with COVID-19. At stages, the safety of workers has been gravely compromised. In April, the US Navy announced that a sailor who tested positive for COVID-19 on the nuclear powered aircraft carrier *USS Theodore Roosevelt* the previous month had died. The virus had scored a veritable hit on the crew, [with 600 sailors testing positive](#). The scrappy handling of the entire affair led to the resignation of acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly, who had, in turn, dismissed the aircraft carrier’s captain Brett Crozier. Crozier had [warned of the threat](#) posed to his crew in a memo to the Navy’s Pacific Fleet that was subsequently leaked. “We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die. If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset – our Sailors.”

The Russian nuclear corporation, Rosatom, revealed in March that it had been assailed by the coronavirus at the construction site of a nuclear power plant being built in Grodno, Belarus. According to Rosatom CEO Alexei Likhachev, the site of the plant had been locked down, [but an easing of physical distancing measures](#) saw a viral return of some vengeance. His address to employees did not inspire confidence. “Now we are facing the busiest season as in the coming weeks we are about to obtain a license and get ready for the physical launch [of the first VVER-1200 reactor]. At the same time we should protect and take care of our staff as much as possible.”

Workers have found themselves quarantined and monitored on site. Rosatom’s utility subsidiary Rosenergoatom [took such measures in April](#), isolating workers in dormitories at the plants of their employ. Similar measures are supposedly being implemented in the various nuclear cities in Russia that remain sealed and concealed from external scrutiny.

William Toby, Simon Saradzhyan and Nikolas Roth [are almost complimentary](#) regarding efforts being made by nuclear organisations in coping with COVID-19. They are, for instance, “implementing broad public health measures, having employees work from home when possible, use personal protection equipment, wash their hands frequently, and keep a proper distance at workstations.” The temperatures of employees are also being checked prior to entering the facility.

In certain cases, nuclear related activities have been halted. In Britain and France, the Sellafield and La Hague plants were shut down. Mining of uranium was halted in South Africa and Namibia. But all these point to a laundry list of items that mask the deep troubles that beset the industry.

In the United States, movement since the disagreements on regulation and safety in 2007 has been minimal. NRC staff doddered over enforcement criteria; the NEI remains committed to its Pandemic Licensing Plan, gathering dust for 13 years. We are left with the [less than comforting words](#) of Lyman. “The NRC assured me ... that its risk standards for granting enforcement discretion have not changed and that if they deemed any plant unsafe they could and would issue an order to shut it down.”

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