

In the Wake of the Fukushima Disaster: “Problems” at American Nuclear Energy Plants

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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[*Nuclear Regulatory Commission Finally Admits Safety Problems at American Reactors ... But Doesn't Go Far Enough*](#)

As Reuters [reported](#) last month, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has publicly been saying American reactors are safe, while privately expressing doubts:

U.S. regulators privately have expressed doubts that some of the nation's nuclear power plants are prepared for a Fukushima-scale disaster, undercutting their public confidence since Japan's nuclear crisis began, documents released by an independent safety watchdog group show.

Internal Nuclear Regulatory Commission e-mails and memos obtained by the Union of Concerned Scientists questioned the adequacy of the back-up plans to keep reactor cooling systems running if off-site power were lost for an extended period.

Those concerns seem to contrast with the confidence U.S. regulators and industry officials have publicly expressed after the world's worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl began to unfold on March 11, UCS officials said on Wednesday.

“While the NRC and the nuclear industry have been reassuring Americans that there is nothing to worry about — that we can do a better job dealing with a nuclear disaster like the one that just happened in Japan — it turns out that privately NRC senior analysts are not so sure,” said Edwin Lyman, a UCS nuclear expert.

The New York Times [noted](#) yesterday that the NRC is finally beginning to acknowledge problems:

The staff of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission acknowledged that the agency's current regulations and disaster plans did not give enough consideration to two factors that had greatly contributed to the continuing Fukushima Daiichi crisis in Japan: simultaneous problems at more than one reactor and a natural disaster that disrupts roads, electricity and other infrastructure surrounding a plant.

For example, the N.R.C. now looks at how well a plant's design can handle a problem at just one reactor, even if there is more than one reactor at the site.

“You have to take a step back and consider what would happen if you had multiple units affected by some ‘beyond design basis’ events,” Mr. Miller said. [[3 nuclear reactors lost primary power just a few weeks ago in Alabama.](#)]

Another problem, staff members acknowledged, is that they have never paid much attention to the issues posed by handling an emergency when there is widespread damage to surrounding roads, power systems and communications links. In the past, the commission has explicitly rejected the notion that it should consider such combined events when reviewing a plant’s safety preparations.

Simultaneous with the commission’s meeting, Representative Edward J. Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat, released a report arguing that a variety of other shortcomings existed at nuclear plants, including the frequent failure of emergency diesel generators, which are essential to plant safety if the power grid goes down. He also criticized the commission for not requiring plants to have a backup power source for spent fuel pools while the reactor is shut for maintenance or refueling.

This is a big step forward for the NRC, which has been [wholly-captured](#) by the nuclear industry for decades.

But if NRC wants to prove that it is really turning over a new leaf – and not just trying to cover its backside – it should [require nuclear plants to use auto-cooling technologies so that a black swan event doesn’t cause a meltdown](#) here.

The Times also notes numerous other safety problems which the NRC admits are plaguing American nuclear power plants, including faulty maintenance and failure to maintain emergency supplies. Just like most disasters, [penny-pinching and corner-cutting](#) can lead to disaster. Indeed, this is very similar to the Gulf and Exxon Valdez oil spills, both of which were made [much worse by BP’s failure to maintain equipment](#) it had promised to maintain.

As Huffington Post [points out](#):

The revelations come on the heels of two lengthy investigations published this week by [ProPublica](#) and the [Center for Public Integrity](#) into the long-standing risk of fire at nuclear power plants. That threat is among the many problems that have come under increased scrutiny at the nation’s power plants — [and at the commission itself](#) — in the wake of the disaster in Japan.

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