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Radioactive Leak at California Nuclear Plant: Almost Caused a Melt Down

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A Meltdown was Averted ... This Time

The San Onofre nuclear power plant leaked radioactive gas last week when steam generating tubes ruptured. Indeed, hundreds of tubes at the San Onofre nuclear plant are experiencing problems.

(To add insult to injury, a worker also fell into a nuclear refueling pool at San Onofre. He may have swallowed fuel particles in radioactive water.)

James Chambers – a licensed nuclear reactor operator and whistleblower from San Onofre – says that the tube rupture was very significant.

Nuclear activist Kevin Kamps says that there were a number of tube ruptures at San Onofre, which could have led to a cascade failure and a meltdown.

He also said that the nuclear plants in the U.S. are getting old and breaking down, and that we're in the "breakdown phase" of nuclear power in this country.

But regulators are letting nuclear owners re-start nuclear power plants before really inspecting what went wrong or whether problems have been fixed.

Aging Nuclear Reactors ... Ticking Time Bombs

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has never turned down the request of a nuclear power plant to be relicensed in the United States. Relicensing is solely a paper process; there is no safety review.

However, old reactors are more dangerous than new ones. The leaking Fukushima reactors are old. And as AP reports:

> Nuclear plants are fundamentally no more immune to the incremental abuses of time than our cars or homes: Metals grow weak and rusty, concrete crumbles, paint peels, crud accumulates. Big components like 17-story-tall concrete containment buildings or 800-ton reactor vessels are all but impossible to replace. Smaller parts and systems can be swapped, but still pose risks as a result of weak maintenance and lax regulation or hard-to-predict failures. Even when things are fixed or replaced, the same parts or others nearby often fail later.
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> Even mundane deterioration at a reactor can carry harsh consequences.

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> Industry and government reports are packed with troubling evidence of unrelenting wear ….
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> The industry has long known of cracking in steel alloy tubing originally used in the steam generators of pressurized water reactors. Ruptures were rampant in these tubes containing radioactive coolant; in 1993 alone, there were seven. Even today, as many as 18 reactors are still running on old generators.
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> Problems can arise even in a newer metal alloy, according to a report of a 2008 industry-government workshop.

However, instead of raising safety standards to deal with the wear and tear at the aging plants, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (which is in bed with the nuclear operators) has relaxed them. As AP notes:

> Federal regulators have been working closely with the nuclear power industry to keep the nation's aging reactors operating within safety standards by repeatedly weakening those standards, or simply failing to enforce them, an investigation by The Associated Press has found.
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> Time after time, officials at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission have decided that original regulations were too strict, arguing that safety margins could be eased without peril, according to records and interviews.
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> The result? Rising fears that these accommodations by the NRC are significantly undermining safety — and inching the reactors closer to an accident that could harm the public and jeopardize the future of nuclear power in the United States.
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> Despite the many problems linked to aging, not a single official body in government or industry has studied the overall frequency and potential impact on safety of such breakdowns in recent years, even as the NRC has extended the licenses of dozens of reactors.
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> The AP investigation found that with billions of dollars and 19 percent of America's electricity supply at stake, a cozy relationship prevails between the industry and its regulator, the NRC.
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> Records show a recurring pattern: Reactor parts or systems fall out of compliance with the rules. Studies are conducted by the industry and government, and all agree that existing standards are "unnecessarily conservative."
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> Regulations are loosened, and the reactors are back in compliance.
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> "That's what they say for everything, whether that's the case or not," said Demetrios Basdekas, an engineer retired from the NRC. "Every time you turn around, they say 'We have all this built-in conservatism.'"

Nobel prize winning economist points out the same dynamic in Japan:

> Stiglitz points out that ... Japan might not be facing a nuclear crisis, were it not for the fact that the very old reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi plant got an extension to keep operating despite safety concerns. That decision was a byproduct, critics say, of Japan's own gamed system known as amakudari, or "descent from heaven", a longstanding, widespread practice in which Japanese senior bureaucrats retire to high-profile positions in the private and public sectors.
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> While Germany has shut down its older nuclear reactors, in the US and elsewhere, even plants that have the same flawed design as Fukushima continue to operate. The nuclear industry's very existence is dependent on hidden public subsidies – costs borne by society in the event of nuclear disaster, as well as the costs of the still-unmanaged disposal of nuclear waste.

Californians Have Opportunity to Shut Down Nuclear Plants

There's a California ballot initiative to shut down all nuclear reactors in the state. See this, this and this. The initiative is spearheaded by someone who has already successfully shut down a nuclear power plant through a ballot initiative.

Note: Nuclear power could be safe, if designed and operated correctly. But neither the nuclear industry or government regulators care about safety.
