AP1000 OVERSIGHT GROUP

NEWS RELEASE

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Reactor Flaws Neglected as Regulators Rush to License New Nuclear Plants, Says Engineer

Former nuclear Senior VP points to more cracks found at operating reactors; groups urge advisory panel to force correction of containment design flaws

DURHAM, NC – Despite the discovery of a continuing series of cracks and holes in protective structures at the nation's nuclear power plants, federal regulators are bowing to industry pressure and forging ahead to approve new nukes despite a critical design flaw. Federal nuclear regulators are neglecting similar vulnerabilities with Westinghouse's new reactor in order to accommodate industry pressure for design approval.

That's according to a former industry senior vice president who says the AP1000 cannot meet safety standards due to a significant design flaw, and that the safety flaw would allow radiation during a nuclear plant accident to pour into the atmosphere without filtration.

During a press conference today, nuclear engineer Arnold Gundersen said the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) continues to neglect regulations and its own engineering standards in its review of the Westinghouse AP1000 containment system. Even though certified inspections of operating reactors have failed to detect containment failures for years, the NRC appears to be accepting the AP1000 and its flawed design for the containment system – the primary barrier against radiation releases.

Gundersen also noted that the recent retaliation against a nuclear plant foreman by the company that would build the AP1000 highlights the significance of heavy corrosion and other failures at existing and proposed plants.

"A large body of work indicates that radiation releases from containment failures in the AP1000 could exceed federal safety limits by up to 1000-fold," said Arnold Gundersen, chief engineer at Fairewinds Associates today. ***"But the NRC staff chose to ignore five key areas of containment failures in their rush to fast-track the design approval process – in a clear capitulation to industry pressure."***

With the long-sought nuclear "renaissance" crumbling in the U.S. and other countries, the NRC is under pressure to approve the AP1000 design in 2011 so that, after years of delay and ballooning cost estimates, construction at one or more plants in the South might finally begin.

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Last April, Gundersen first released evidence challenging Westinghouse's most-publicized safety feature – a "passive" emergency cooling system. During an accident, he said the system would act like a chimney, drawing radiation directly into the environment if the containment had suffered corrosion, thermal cracking or other degradation similar to at least 40 failures documented at currently operating plants. Westinghouse responded that paint coatings and inspections would prevent cracks and holes from developing.

But Gundersen has continued to find evidence that both corrosion-resistant coatings and inspections have been prone to repeated failures at thick-walled containment systems throughout the industry. One corrosion hole advanced for almost 30-years prior to detection, and just last October a hole that was missed by earlier industry-approved inspections was discovered in Florida's Turkey Point 3 containment system.

In spite of evidence to the contrary, last month an NRC panel, the Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards (ACRS), issued a preliminary opinion that the AP1000 appears to meet reasonable safety criteria, pending resolution of a number of concerns involving the outer "shield building" and the inner containment barrier.*

But Gundersen said today that NRC staff has misled the ACRS by not informing the panel about the increasing number of containment system failures – even though such failures continue being reported at nuclear plants throughout the U.S.

"Federal regulations do not allow the NRC to simply bypass evaluation of well-identified scenarios for containment failure," explained attorney John Runkle today.

Gundersen and watchdog groups are urging the advisory panel to require NRC staff to revise their Severe Accident Mitigation Design Alternatives (SAMDA) analysis by evaluating the relationship between the large number of serious containment degradations at existing plants and the AP1000 design flaw he first identified in April 2010.

The veteran engineer explained that vented filters must be required in order to reduce radiation exposure to the public in the event of an accident at an AP1000 nuclear power plant.

"The NRC treats the industry like a client, but they can't sweep this problem under the rug," said Jim Warren of watchdog group NC WARN today. ***"The agency has much to explain for allowing all the current containment failures to develop, and public interest groups are demanding they correct this known problem before attempting to build a new style nuclear plant that might create a whole new host of problems."***

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See the new report by Arnold Gundersen at the top of http://www.fairewinds.com

The AP1000 Oversight Group is an alliance of non-profit organizations concerned about safety issues and costs of the AP1000 reactors.