Evacuations & Drills Quietly Pared near Nuke Plants

JEFF DONN, AP National Writer

Without fanfare, the nation's nuclear power regulators have overhauled community emergency planning for the first time in more than three decades, requiring fewer exercises for major accidents and recommending that fewer people be evacuated right away.

Nuclear watchdogs voiced surprise and dismay over the quietly adopted revamp — the first since the program began after Three Mile Island in 1979. Several said they were unaware of the changes until now, though they took effect in December.

At least four years in the works, the changes appear to clash with more recent lessons of last year's reactor crisis in Japan. A mandate that local responders always run practice exercises for a radiation release has been eliminated — a move viewed as downright bizarre by some emergency planners.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which run the program together, have added one new exercise: More than a decade after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, state and community police will now take part in exercises that prepare for a possible assault on their local plant.

Still, some emergency officials say this new exercise doesn't go far enough.

These changes, while documented in obscure federal publications, went into effect

with hardly any notice by the general public.

Michael Mariotte, director of the anti-nuclear group Nuclear Information and Resource Service, normally tracks such rules very carefully. This time, he learned of them from an Associated Press reporter.

"Unless there are public interest groups out there pointing to the things these agencies are doing, they generally prefer to be operating in quiet, especially if it's likely to be controversial," he said. "A typical American does not read the Federal Register."

The Web archives of FEMA and the NRC show no news releases on the changes during December 2011 and January 2012. The revisions took effect Dec. 23, at the peak of the holiday season when Americans tend to focus on last-minute gift shopping and social gatherings.

An AP investigative series in June exposed weaknesses in the U.S. emergency planning program. The stories detailed how many nuclear reactors are now operating beyond their design life under rules that have been relaxed to account for deteriorating safety margins. The series also documented dramatic population growth around nuclear power plants and limitations in the scope of emergency exercises. For example, local authorities assemble at command centers where they test communications, but they do not deploy around the community, reroute traffic or evacuate anyone as in a real emergency.

The latest changes, especially relaxed exercise plans for 50-mile emergency zones, are being flayed by some local planners and activists who say the widespread contamination in Japan from last year's Fukushima nuclear accident screams out for stronger planning in the United States, not weaker rules.

FEMA officials say the revised standards introduce more variability into planning exercises and will help keep responders on their toes. The nuclear power industry has praised the changes on similar grounds.

Onsite security forces at nuclear power plants have practiced defending against make-believe assaults since 1991 and increased the frequency of these drills after the 2001 terrorist attacks. The new exercises for community responders took years to consider and adopt with prolonged industry and government consultations that led to repeated drafts. The NRC made many changes requested by the industry in copious comments.

Federal personnel will now evaluate if state and local authorities have enough resources to handle a simultaneous security threat and radiation release. Their ability to communicate with onsite security officials during an attack also will be evaluated during exercises.

But community planners wonder why local forces won't have to practice repelling an attack along with plant security guards — something federal emergency planners acknowledge could be necessary in a real assault.

They said state and local police are more likely to be needed for tasks like escorting damage control teams than for confronting the attackers.

"We're assuming these guys don't want to escape, or else they wouldn't have showed up," said Randy Sullivan, a health physicist who works on emergency preparedness at the NRC. "A dragnet and security sweep is less important than saving equipment that is important to core damage."

None of the revisions has been questioned more than the new requirement that some planning exercises incorporate a reassuring premise: that little or no harmful radiation is released. Federal regulators say that conducting a wider variety of accident scenarios makes the exercises less predictable.

However, many state and local emergency officials say such exercises make no sense in a program designed to protect the population from radiation released by a nuclear accident.

"We have the real business of protecting public health to do if we're not needed at

an exercise," Texas radiation-monitoring specialist Robert Free wrote bluntly to federal regulators when they broached the idea. "Not to mention the waste of public monies."

Environmental and anti-nuclear activists also scoffed. "You need to be practicing for a worst case, rather than a nonevent," said nuclear policy analyst Jim Riccio of the group Greenpeace.

In a statement, FEMA acknowledged that a simulated problem during a no-release exercise is handled on plant grounds. Federal planners say this exercise still requires community decision makers to mobilize and set up communication lines with officials on the site, practicing critical capabilities, even though they won't need to measure and respond to radiation.

While officials stress the importance of limiting radioactive releases, the revisions also favor limiting initial evacuations, even in a severe accident. Under the previous standard, people within two miles would be immediately evacuated, along with everyone five miles downwind. Now, in a large quick release of radioactivity, emergency personnel would concentrate first on evacuating people only within two miles. Others would be told to stay put and wait for a possible evacuation order later.

Timothy Greten, who administers the community readiness program at FEMA, said it wouldn't be necessary to tell people to stay put "if you could evacuate everybody within 10 or 15 minutes." But he said hunkering down can be safer in some locations and circumstances, "especially for a short-term solution."

Federal officials say people could risk worse exposure in an evacuation impeded by overcrowded roadways or bad weather.

This change, however, raises the likely severity of a panicked exodus outside the official evacuation area. Even a federal study used to shape the new program warns that up to 20 percent of people near official evacuation areas might also leave and potentially slow things down for everyone — and that's assuming clear instructions.

"If it were me, I would evacuate" even without an official go-ahead, said Cheryl L. Chubb, a nuclear emergency planner with the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, who is critical of the changes.

At Fukushima, more than 150,000 people evacuated, including about 50,000 who left on their own, according to Japan's Education Ministry. At Three Mile Island, 195,000 people are estimated to have fled, though officials urged evacuation only for pregnant women and young children within five miles. About 135,000 people lived within 10 miles of the site at the time.

In its series, the AP reported that populations within 10 miles of U.S. nuclear sites have ballooned by as much as 4 1/2 times since 1980. Nuclear sites were originally picked in less populated areas to minimize the impact of accidents. Now, about 120 million Americans — almost 40 percent — live within 50 miles of a nuclear power plant, according to the AP's analysis of 2010 Census data. The Indian Point plant in Buchanan, N.Y., is at the center of the largest such zone, with 17.3 million people, including almost all of New York City.

"They're saying, 'If there's no way to evacuate, then we won't,'" Phillip Musegaas, a lawyer with the environmental group Riverkeeper, said of the stronger emphasis on taking shelter at home. The group is challenging relicensing of Indian Point.

In February, a national coalition of environmental and anti-nuclear groups asked the NRC to expand evacuation planning from 10 miles to 25 miles and to broaden separate 50-mile readiness zones to 100 miles. The groups also pressed for some exercises that simulate a nuclear accident accompanied by a natural disaster like an earthquake or hurricane — akin to the combination of tsunami, blackout and meltdowns at Fukushima.

The new U.S. program has kept the 10- and 50-mile planning zones in place, as well as the requirement for one full exercise for a 10-mile evacuation every two years. However, required 50-mile planning exercises will now be held less often: every eight years, instead of every six years.

Exercises are full-blown tests, with FEMA evaluation, of the entire range of community capabilities needed in an accident. Smaller drills of specific skills are run more frequently.

In the state-led 50-mile exercises, emergency personnel practice the logistics of dealing with contaminated food and milk over a large region. They also prepare the mechanisms to relocate people, clean up contamination and later return evacuees to their communities.

Gary Lima, who manages the nuclear readiness program at the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency, said 50-mile exercises should be run more frequently than once every eight years. "Recovery is really your hardest work," he said.

Even when the program mandated a six-year timetable, federal authors of the 2002 program manual acknowledged that "many (first responders) have indicated a desire" for even more frequent exercises in the 50-mile zone.

The Japanese disaster reinforced such worries when officials told some towns beyond 12 miles from the disabled plant to evacuate. Soil and crops were contaminated for scores of miles around. At one point, health authorities in Tokyo, 140 miles away, advised families not to give children the local water, which was contaminated by fallout to twice the government limit for infants.

The U.S. government recommended that Americans stay at least 50 miles from the Japanese plant. Government officials said the same kind of action could be taken domestically in a similar accident, but advance planning for U.S. evacuations is, in fact, restricted to 10 miles.

Nuclear regulators advocate "one standard to protect Japanese people and one standard for the American people," said Richard Brodsky, a former New York state lawmaker who is fighting relicensing of Indian Point.

The Japanese government had budgeted $14 billion through March 2014 for the cleanup, but it's expected eventually to cost far more. And some evacuees may never return home.

Paul Blanch, a retired engineer who worked on safety in the U.S. nuclear industry, said the American government largely ignores the potential economic costs of

nuclear accidents when it calculates risk. "How do you clean up trees and leaves and soil?" Branch asked referring to fallout. "How do you put a value on that?"

Officials for FEMA and the NRC said they are still studying whether Japan's experience points to the need for further changes in the United States.

Pressed on the reduced frequency of 50-mile exercises, federal planners said community personnel can practice skills as often as they like, without needing a full-blown federal evaluation each time.

The Nuclear Energy Institute, the industry's main advocate, strongly backed the eight-year timetable to reduce the burden of adding the attack exercises. Asked about the other changes, NEI spokesman Steven Kerekes said they bring more federal oversight, formalizing practices already begun at many sites.

However, no nuclear plant has ever been shut down for deficiencies in the emergency response plan of surrounding communities.

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