Three Mile Island Alert

The Newsletter of Three Mile Island Alert March 1996

Nuclear Utilities Want to Rewrite Nuclear Waste Laws

from NIRS

The U.S. Congress is in the process of making sweeping changes in the Nuclear Waste Policy Act (NWPA), the law governing high-level radioactive waste produced by commercial nuclear power reactors and some nuclear weapons wastes. The new proposals, embodied in HR 1020 (Upton-MI) and S 1271 (Craig-ID) would mandate the movement of high-level waste -- irradiated fuel -- away from reactor sites to a "temporary" pad, like a parking lot, at Yucca Mountain in Nevada.

This shift in policy constitutes the de facto selection of Yucca Mountain for the permanent depository, even though the site is still under study, and even though serious questions remain as to the suitability of Yucca Mountain as a permanent repository. The changes in legislation would also transfer the ownership of the waste and all liability associated with the waste to the U.S. taxpayer before there is a plan for permanently storing the waste, thus relieving the nuclear utilities from any role in future steps beyond a parking lot in Nevada.

The changes to the NWPA would trigger tens of thousands of shipments of high-level radioactive waste across 43 states in a program that would start as soon as 1998 and continue for 30 years or more. The proposals also weaken existing radiation and environmental standards.

The House bill, HR 1020, introduced by Fred Upton of Michigan, was written by the Nuclear Energy Institute, the lobbying arm of the nuclear power industry. The utilities are facing the problem in that each time they refuel the reactor, they must store the irradiated waste fuel in on-site storage pools. These storage pools are quickly filling up and several nuclear plants across the country are threatened with having to close unless they find someplace to dump their spent fuel. HR 1020 gives the beleaguered industry a place to dump its radioactive waste.

While proponents of changes to the NWPA argue that the temporary storage site is a safer way to store radioactive waste than the current storage system, the proposal is really just a shell game. Ironically, the technology to be used at the temporary storage site is the same technology that is being used at a number of nuclear plants that have run out of pool space already. The proposal puts the problem of

(Continued on page 3, column 3)

Supreme Court Allows Three Mile Island Suits to Continue

from UPI

On February 26, 1996, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to review a lower court ruling that allows personal injury suits arising out of the 1979 nuclear accident at Three Mile Island. More than 2,000 people have filed suits in which they claim to have suffered some type of injury caused by exposure to radiation from the power plant accident in Dauphin County, Pa. A number of businesses have also filed suit against the owners and operators of the nuclear facility.

The defendants, a group of power companies, contended in federal court that while the release of radiation at the site exceeded permissible limits, the plaintiffs lived far enough away so that none of them was exposed to radiation in excess of those limits. "The dose to the population surrounding TMI was investigated by several federal and state agencies," the power companies said in a brief to the Supreme Court, "all of which agreed that the environmental monitoring surrounding the site confirmed that the highest exposures in populated areas were below 100 millirems." Federal regulations permit exposures of 5,000 millirems -- measurement units of radiation -- on site per year.

The Third Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia eventually held that, in personal injury suits, the plaintiffs were only required to show that a release at

(Continued on page 2, column 3)

Three Mile Island Alert
315 Peffer Street
Harrisburg, PA 17102

Three Mile Island Alert

Three Mile Island Alert (TMIA) is a non-profit citizens' organization dedicated to the promotion of safe-energy alternatives to nuclear power, especially the Three Mile Island nuclear plant.

Formed in 1977 after the construction and licensing of TMI Unit-1 and the construction of the infamous Unit-2, TMIA is the largest and oldest safe-energy group in central Pennsylvania.

This newsletter is published approximately 6 times per year.

Publisher - Kay Pickering
Editor - David Raeker-Jordan

Three Mile Island Alert
315 Peffer Street
Harrisburg, PA 17102
Phone: (717) 233-7897
FAX: (717) 233-3261

Robert Pollard Retires From UCS

from Nuclear Monitor

Robert Pollard retired as Senior Nuclear Safety Engineer of the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) at the end of 1995. For nearly 20 years, Pollard had been the most knowledgeable, and probably the most effective activist in the safe energy movement.

When Pollard left his job as NRC project manager at Indian Point in February 1976, the effect was dramatic and immediate. *60 Minutes* broadcast the first notice that a high-level NRC employee was quitting his job to join the anti-nuclear movement. Newspaper headlines quickly followed, and the nation's discomfort with nuclear power began to grow.

Pollard played a major role in nearly every reactor closing over the past decade, including Rancho Seco, Trojan, and Yankee Rowe. And his work exposing safety problems at other reactors, most recently Maine Yankee, has left utility executives sputtering -- and the public a lot safer.

"His experience as a former NRC inspector turned public safety advocate is irreplaceable," said Paul Gunter, director of NIRS' Reactor Watchdog Project. "Bob Pollard will be sorely missed by nuclear watchdog groups." Pollard says he doesn't know what he will do next, but that it will be neither "illegal nor pro-nuclear."

(Continued from page 1)

the TMI boundary site exceeded federal limits, that they were exposed to some radiation (not necessarily the limit) and that they suffered some injuries caused by the radiation. The power companies asked the Supreme Court to review the appellate court ruling. They contended that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has determined that some radiation exposures are permissible, and that the appellate court decision was contrary to federal regulations and the principles of injury law, as determined by U.S. court decisions.

The Supreme Court denied review in a one-line order without comment, allowing the injury cases to go forward. Ten "test cases" are scheduled to begin this June in U.S. Middle District Chief Judge Sylvia Rambo's Harrisburg courtroom.

The companies asking for Supreme Court review were General Public Utilities Corp., Metropolitan Edison Co., Jersey Central Power & Light Co., Pennsylvania Electric Co., Babcock & Wilcox Co., McDermott Inc., Raytheon Constructors Inc., Burns & Roe Enterprises Inc. and Dresser Industries Inc.

(see related story, "Expert 'Meltdown' Hits TMI Lawsuit," page 6)

Please renew your TMIA membership

Name_____ Phone_____

Address_____ Zip_____

Membership: ❑ $20 Regular Member ❑ $50 Sustaining Member

❑ $25 Non-Profit Org ❑ $100 Patron

❑ $5 Low Income/Student ❑ $200 Club Member ❑ $10 Newsletter only

Intervention Fund Contribution: ❑ $10 ❑ $20 ❑ $50 ❑ $100

Checks of $50 or more can be made payable to the TMI Legal Fund for tax deduction purposes.

RETURN TO: **TMIA, 315 Peffer Street, Harrisburg, PA 17102**

The official registration and financial information for Three Mile Island Alert may be obtained from the PA Department of State by calling toll free, within PA, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.

New Poll Finds Most Americans Want Independent Commission, Not Interim Storage

from Nuclear Monitor

A new public opinion poll says that 70% of the American people would like to have an independent blue-ribbon commission to re-evaluate the nation's radioactive waste program. That is compared to only 27% who preferred the nuclear industry's current solution: building a nuclear waste cask parking lot near Yucca Mountain, Nevada.

The question, commissioned by NIRS, Safe Energy Communication Council, and Greenpeace, was part of a larger poll conducted by the Sustainable Energy Budget Coalition. The poll presented an either/or question: i.e., which of the two options do you prefer? The poll was conducted by GOP pollster Vincent Breglio during early December 1995. The survey has a margin of error of +/-3.1 percent.

The poll results straddled party lines, geographical area, political affiliation, and other normal differences. However, there was a 12 point difference between men and women on the issue. While 76% of women supported the commission over interim storage, only 63% of men did--still a healthy majority.

The poll result was released at a Washington press conference January 18. Said Scott Denman, executive director of SECC, "Our message today is clear: while the nuclear industry wants a quick fix to the problem of nuclear waste storage, voters want a solution their grandchildren can live with." Also speaking at the press conference were representatives from NIRS, Greenpeace, and the Nuclear Waste Citizens Coalition.

In other poll results, by a 55% majority, the public said that renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies should receive the Department of Energy's highest priority for funding; only 8.5% chose nuclear power. Similarly, 30.5% said nuclear power should be the first choice of budget-cutters, with fossil fuels coming in second at 20.3%, then renewable energy (13.5%), natural gas (4.9%), and energy efficiency (4.1%).

In another question, 71% of the public disagreed with the statement that federal funds should be used to develop a new generation of nuclear reactors. Meanwhile, a Nuclear Energy Institute poll conducted around the same time found that 68% of the public says we should keep the nuclear option "open." Significantly, the question did not address the issue of taxpayer funding. Moreover, only 12% believed new nuclear reactors should be built now.

The new poll results should give additional pause to the co-sponsors of HR 1020 and S 1271, which would implement the nuclear industry's plan to move high-level radioactive waste from reactor sites to a Nevada parking lot. A vote on HR 1020--originally expected last summer--still has not been scheduled, although it could come up early in the new Congressional session. But many co-sponsors apparently signed on without fully understanding the bill's implications. In December, the Clinton administration announced its opposition to any "interim" waste storage schemes at the present time.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You've probably done it before, but if not (actually, even if you have), contact your Congressmembers and express your opposition to HR 1020 and S 1271. Send them the results of this reliable public opinion poll.

Question:

Congress is considering changing the nuclear waste law. Two plans are being proposed.

Plan A under consideration would permit the transportation by rail and truck, in the near future, of radioactive waste from nuclear reactors around the country to a temporary, above-ground storage site in Nevada until a permanent solution can be found.
Plan B under consideration calls for the immediate formation of an independent review commission to find new solutions to storing radioactive waste before any of it is transported around the country.

Which of these plans do you support?

Plan A: 26.6%
Plan B: 69.7%

(Continued from page 1)

radioactive waste off the reactor site -- out of site, out of mind -- and relieves the utilities of any liability for the radioactive waste they created. The only net change in safety is the increased hazard of transporting tens of thousands of shipments of radioactive waste through 43 states.

The Senate bill, S 1271, introduced by Larry Craig of Idaho, is similar to HR 1020, but includes broad preemption of state authority over any part of the program, including the transportation of high-level nuclear waste through your state.

HR 1020 has been at a standstill because of revisions made by the House Commerce Committee that change how the programs are funded and that trigger House Budget Act provisions ("pay-as-you-go"). The sponsors of the bill would not bring it to the floor until budget matters were resolved. Now it seems that in March they will try to use the House FY-97 Budget Resolution to insert a "fix." The idea is to collect a fee retroactively on electricity generated by reactors prior to the original NWPA to pay for this "temporary" dump. If approved, HR 1020 is likely to go to the House floor soon thereafter. S 1271, which is still in the Senate Energy committee, is likely to come to the Senate floor in 1996.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

⇨In December, the Clinton Administration went on record in the Senate Energy Committee hearing as opposing the current legislation. Support them! Write President Clinton's Council on Environmental Quality, Old Executive Building, Room 360, Washington, DC 20501. Or call (202) 456-1414.

⇨Call your U.S. Representative and Senators. Capitol Switchboard: (202) 224-3121.

⇨Join the Nuclear Waste Citizen's Coalition for Citizen's Lobby Days on Radioactive Waste, April 14-17. For more information, call Mary Olsen at Nuclear Information and Resource Service (202) 328-0002.

Watts Bar Goes Critical

from Nuclear Monitor

The Tennessee Valley Authority's (TVA) Watts Bar-1 reactor--the last commercial nuclear plant in the United States--reached its initial criticality January 18, 1996. On January 31 the NRC Commissioners held a meeting on a full-power license for Watts Bar. The Commissioners declined to give the reactor a license at that time. On February 6, 1996, however, the NRC gave permission for Watts Bar to operate at full power.

Originally planned as a two reactor unit complex, Watts Bar received its construction permit in 1973. At the time, TVA was engaged in the most aggressive nuclear construction program in the country, with plans to build 17 large nuclear reactors. In reality, TVA managed to build only six of them, and three, at Browns Ferry, Alabama, were closed for nearly a decade due to safety problems and mismanagement. One of the Browns Ferry reactors remains closed.

TVA first sought a low-power license for Watts Bar in 1985. Whistle blower allegations about thousands of safety deficiencies at the reactor, however, and the general collapse of TVA's nuclear program, delayed license approval for 10 years.

Even now, whistle blower allegations of safety problems linger. Is Watts Bar already an aging reactor? A key question for TVA economically, and for Watts Bar from a safety perspective, is whether--considering the reactor's unprecedented 23-year construction time--this is already an aging nuclear reactor.

Even before initial criticality was achieved, the NRC seemed to be saying that Watts Bar is an old reactor not subject to today's rules. In an investigation of Watts Bar's fire protection capabilities, NIRS learned that the reactor is using a flammable material to protect against fire in plant penetration seals. NRC fire protection regulations, adopted in 1980 following a fire at TVA's Browns Ferry reactor in 1975, prohibit the use of flammable materials in penetration seals. The Browns Ferry fire, which nearly led to a nuclear meltdown, began in a penetration seal using flammable material.

NIRS has sent letters to the NRC staff and NRC Chairwoman Shirley Jackson warning that Watts Bar is not in compliance with the NRC's own regulations. Although NIRS has not received a reply from Jackson, in an interview with the trade publication *Inside NRC*, the agency's senior fire protection engineer Patrick Madden said that Watts Bar is exempt from the regulations, since it received its construction permit in 1973--before the regulations were implemented.

Madden argued that the rules were intended to apply only to new reactors built after 1980. No viable reactors have been ordered since 1973, and Madden admitted to the publication that he could not name a single reactor that meets the federal regulations.

But another staffer said that a different rule may apply to Watts Bar. That staffer, Conrad McCracken, said in a December 21, 1995, letter to NIRS that the flammable penetration seal material is an "acceptable deviation" from the rules. In other words, the NRC may not agree even among itself on its legal basis to license Watts Bar, but the agency is determined to do so regardless of the basis. And the public, which generally assumes that the NRC at least plays by its own rules, won't know that when it comes to nuclear reactors, the rules are made to be broken.

Peace Prize Goes to A-Bomb Scientist Who Turned Critic

from Greenwire

On October 13, 1995, British physicist Joseph Rotblat and the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts to end the use of nuclear weapons. The prize "stands as a 'protest' against French and Chinese nuclear testing," the chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committees, Francis Sejersted, said.

The Pugwash Conferences, named after the Canadian village in Nova Scotia where the first such meeting was held in 1957, bring together scientists for meetings several times a year on such issues as the spread of nuclear and chemical weapons.

During World War II, Rotblat worked on atomic bomb research at the secret government laboratory in Los Alamos, but walked out in March 1944 when its director, Gen. Leslie Groves, told him that the real purpose of the bomb would be to counter the Soviet Union. Rotblat, together with Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russel, was one of the founders of Pugwash. In interviews after winning the Nobel, Rotblat used the occasion to express his "outrage" at France's recent nuclear tests in the South Pacific.

Blaze Extinguished at Limerick Nuclear Plant

from the Associated Press

On December 10, 1995, a blaze that burned for 12 minutes in a diesel generator compartment at the Limerick nuclear plant prompted the plant to declare a low-level emergency situation. PECO Energy Co. declared an unusual event at the plant when the fire was detected in an overhead lighting fixture in one of the plant's diesel generator compartments. The fire was extinguished after plant operators cut the power flow to the light fixture. The cause was under investigation.

Both Limerick plants continued to operate at 100 percent power. Plant equipment was undamaged, and the company ended the unusual event after about 30 minutes.

NRC Faults TMI's Security but Decides Against Fine

from Patriot-News

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has cited GPU Nuclear, the operator of the Three Mile Island nuclear plant, for failing to maintain plant security during a four-day period in September 1995. No fines were imposed against GPU Nuclear, but a level-four violation, the lowest level the NRC issues, was lodged against the company.

GPU Nuclear was cited for four violations that occurred between September 12 and September 15. The company failed to have a security guard present while work was being done on a piece of equipment outside the plant's fenced-in security area. The guards were needed, according to the NRC, because the work "resulted in the existence of three, and the potential for a fourth, unmonitored and unprotected pathway" through a pipeline into a high-security area of the plant.

Diane Screncio, spokeswoman for the NRC regional office in Philadelphia, said the incidents were not considered serious enough to warrant a fine. The NRC weighed several factors to support that decision, including: GPU Nuclear has had no violations for the last two years, the problems were discovered and reported by the company, and GPU Nuclear took swift action to correct the problem.

Eric Epstein, spokesperson for Three Mile Island Alert, said he was disappointed by the NRC's action. "The NRC thought the safety significance was low, but we saw systemic inadequacies that warranted a penalty." Had the violation concerned a single incident, Three Mile Island Alert would have concurred with the NRC, but in this case there were four violations, Epstein said.

Security concerns are paramount at commercial nuclear plants because of the threat of terrorist attacks. GPU Nuclear has spent more than $1 million to upgrade security at TMI, including steel barriers to prevent truck bomb assaults.

Security Problems are Nothing New at TMI

by Scott Portzline, TMIA Security Committee Chairman

In September 1995, four security breaches of the protected boundary at TMI were discovered while the reactor was shutdown for refueling. Potential pathways into the protected area were left unguarded. These gaps highlight ongoing problems of lax security at TMI and the nuclear industry at large. Although the NRC has a history of telling Congressional oversight committees that it is improving security, last winter the NRC decided to reduce security regulations during refueling periods. These reductions were intended to save money and allow contractors to move about the plant without pausing for what the industry claims are redundant security checks.

These reductions combined with recent cutbacks in security personnel at TMI are a bad idea. During refueling outages, incoming traffic increases dramatically and many workers re-enter the protected and vital areas without a proper security check. The NRC has lowered its previous standard while trying to assure the public that all is well. It is worth noting that all but one of the more than 120 sabotage incidents at US nuclear plants have been perpetrated by insiders.

Three Mile Island reduced its security staff by about six persons during 1995. (The actual size of the security staff is considered safeguarded material.) Personnel were terminated despite a 1993 vehicle intrusion which revealed a vulnerability to terrorist attacks. That incident involved a 31-year-old man who drove a station wagon into the guarded entrance at Three Mile Island, crashed through the protected area fence and then through the turbine building door. He exited the car, descended a ladder and hid for nearly four hours before being apprehended. Upon reviewing the events, an NRC Incident Investigation Team (IIT) found more than 40 problems with security at TMI and concluded that the TMI security staff would not have precluded a hostile intruder from reaching and attempting to enter the vital areas. Still, the IIT reported to the NRC that TMI had responded "appropriately."

June of 1995 marked the twentieth anniversary of allegations by two TMI guards that "sabotage would be easy" (Harrisburg Independent Press, 6/13/75). The guards, along with Ralph Nader, described the problems at TMI during a press conference in Washington DC. Among the allegations, the two guards said that more than 300 keys for one security gate had been disseminated to truck drivers and other contractors. The men revealed that security logs and guard qualifications were falsified on many occasions. They also said that security cameras at TMI were of such poor quality that guards not only didn't watch them, but turned them off to save electricity. Ralph Nader called security within the nuclear industry "a sham" and requested an investigation of all plants.

The revelations of the two guards and Nader led to several investigations by Congress and the US Government Accounting Office (GAO) in the late 1970s. The GAO agreed with the two TMI whistle-blowers and testified to the severity of the problems in a report titled "Security At Nuclear Powerplants -- At Best, Inadequate." The NRC responded in 1980 with a report called "Development of a 'Good' Physical Protection Plan/ Capability." Their title seemed to be an admission of lax security.

Since the 1970's, there have been several congressional hearings. In each case, the oversight committees are disturbed by the lack of improvement and the lackadaisical attitudes of the NRC. The pattern has been continuing for over two decades and now regulations are being eased at a time when domestic terrorism is increasing. TMIA is hoping for another investigation; one which will result in improvements that are terribly overdue.

(Scott Portzline has testified to the NRC, US Senate, PA House of Representatives, and the Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards. Ten months before the 1993 TMI intrusion, he warned an NRC Advisory Panel that security at TMI was poor.)

Expert "Meltdown" Hits TMI Lawsuit

from Pennsylvania Law Weekly

Performing what she called a "gatekeeping" function, Middle District of Pennsylvania District Judge Sylvia Rambo slammed the gate shut on most of the plaintiffs' expert testimony about radiation dosage from the world famous 1979 Three Mile Island accident and the harm it caused.

In *In Re TMI Litigation Cases Consolidated*, Judge Rambo did a hands-on review of the science supporting the reports of 11 of plaintiffs' experts on subjects ranging from nuclear science and health physics to tree studies and meteorology. By the time she was finished ruling on defense motions in the 8-year-old class action suit, all or most of what eight experts had to say was out, and the testimony of two others was left dangling.

Only one expert survived the cut unscathed --Dr. Vladimir A. Shevchenko, an expert on the cellular effects of radiation on plants. Shevchenko had experience at the Chernobyl nuclear accident site and offered theories connecting changes in trees to the TMI accident.

In making her ruling, Judge Rambo steered clear of the discarded "general scientific acceptance" test and keyed in on the new multi-factored "reliability" standard, usually thought to be more forgiving and inclusive. But instead of producing more liberal use of experts, the analysis had the opposite effect here.

In Shevchenko's case, the factor that counted most in letting in his testimony was his high level of expertise. "Since the early 1960s," the opinion said, "Professor Shevchenko has been involved almost exclusively in studying the aftermath of nuclear accidents and nuclear testing at Kyshtym, the Eastern Ural Radiation Belt Region, Chernobyl, Semipalatinsk Polygon, and the Altai Region," the court said. "Thus, what his testimony may lack in rigid conformity to technical standards is amply counterbalanced by his extensive expertise." The court let in Shevchenko's estimate of radiation dosage based on studies of tree deaths and of chromosomal damage in blood taken from persons living in the TMI area.

But none of the other plaintiffs' experts fared nearly so well. Among the matters on which the plaintiffs failed their burden of showing "reliability" were: a "blowout" theory for explaining how an atmospheric release of "fission product noble gases" occurred, a "plume dispersion" model suggesting there was a concentrated plume of released radiation that didn't harmlessly disperse, another expert's calculation of dosage based on nearby tree damage, and the use of soil studies and mortality studies.

In each instance the court found flaws with the offered testimony, usually citing faulty methodology, inconsistencies, the failure of the experts to publish any of their reports for peer review, the lack of "fit" between scientific principles and the case at hand and the tendency of the testimony to be particularly confusing to the jury.

Although the function of "gatekeeper" has been thought to be less intrusive upon the jury's factfinding role, there were signs in the court's opinion that the plaintiffs bore a heavy burden in the uncharted area of nuclear accidents just to get their experts' opinions to a jury, signs that do not bode well for plaintiffs injured by forces that are scientifically complex.

In deferring on the admissibility of one expert's opinion about the types of effects on people to be expected from a high dose of radiation, the court laid down some sobering demands. "To convince this court of the reliability of his testimony, Dr. Molholt, and any other expert that testifies in support of his reports, will have to directly and succinctly rebut the challenges made and flaws exposed in defendants' [proposed] findings," Judge Rambo said.

Soon after Judge Rambo's decision, attorney for the plaintiffs, Larry Burman, said the plaintiffs' lawyers had filed a motion for reconsideration of Judge Rambo's pretrial ruling. Burman said the plaintiffs' legal team would file a brief to accompany the motion for reconsideration within the next few days. The motion will primarily argue that Rambo applied new expert admissibility standards too narrowly.

Public Utility Commission to Hold Hearings on Electric Power Competition

from a December 1995 PUC Letter to Electric Utility Consumers

The Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission wants to make you aware of the most important electric issue of the 90's. Does Pennsylvania want or need electric power competition? The Public Utility Commission must answer this question in a recommendation to the Governor and the State Assembly in the Spring. We think your opinions on this topic are important to making a sound recommendation.

The PUC will be holding one more public input hearing on this issue. We encourage your involvement. You do not need to be an expert to testify. There will be both a 1 p.m. and 7 p.m. session.

March 19, 1996
Pennsylvania State Museum
Third and North Streets
Harrisburg 17108-1026

Thyroid Cancer Stockpiles of Anti-Cancer Chemical Lacking

from Cancer Biotechnology Weekly

Sixteen years after the Three Mile Island (TMI) nuclear accident unleashed a frantic, midnight search for a badly needed radiation-blocking chemical, the government has yet to stockpile the drug in case of another mishap. A presidential commission that investigated the 1979 accident near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, recommended potassium iodide be stored near commercial nuclear power plants as a protection against cancer of the thyroid gland, which is particularly susceptible to radiation. Easily made and costing only pennies, potassium iodide pills can prevent thyroid cancer in people exposed to radiation.

But the government has rejected stockpiling at least three times in the last decade, concluding the effort "would not be worthwhile" because of the low probability of a significant release of radiation from a power plant. Critics of the policy argue it would cost as little as ten cents to protect people living near such plants with potassium iodide pills. Officials in three states that have stockpiled the pills said the program is working with little difficulty.

The nuclear industry says stockpiling the pills would be impractical. "We don't believe there would be any health benefit because you would not get this material to people in a timely manner," says John Schmitt, a director for emergency preparedness at the Nuclear Energy Institute, the nuclear industry trade group.

In a letter to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) two years ago, the industry cited "substantial cost impacts" of stockpiling. It also contended making the pills available would "result in a potentially significant negative public perception" and cause confusion about whether to evacuate or seek shelter should an accident occur. An industry study of the issue raised concern that the public might think the drug is being distributed because of heightened safety concerns. But some critics both within and outside the government question why the relatively cheap drug should not be made available since its usefulness depends on being administered within hours of radiation exposure.

"You're talking about a very inexpensive drug. We have spent more money trying to defend why we shouldn't do it than it would cost to get someone to make it and stockpile it," says Dr. Jerome Halperin, a former senior official of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). In 1979, he was assigned to try to find enough potassium iodide to protect the tens of thousands of people near the Three Mile Island plant as the nation's worst nuclear accident was unfolding. At the time, Halperin recalled recently, "there was no commercial source. ... We had to scurry around quickly," working around the clock for three days. Finally, enough of the drug was found, although it was never needed as the threat of a massive radiation release subsided.

Later the Kemeny Commission, appointed by President Carter to investigate the TMI accident, urged that potassium iodide be stockpiled. If taken within hours of radiation exposure, a modest dose of potassium iodide saturates the thyroid and blocks the radioactive iodine, protecting against cancer and other illnesses, medical experts say. The thyroid, a gland in the neck, secretes a hormone that regulates body growth and metabolism.

In 1985, the NRC concluded stockpiling was not worthwhile. It has reiterated that position twice since then. In 1994, however, the agency staff concluded stockpiling - at the cost of 10 cents per year for each of the nearly 800,000 people protected - would be "prudent."

Tennessee, Alabama and Arizona already store the pills in counties near nuclear power plants, with utilities paying the bill. In Alabama, stockpiling "hasn't created problems for us," says Kirk Whatley, director of the state's division of radiation control. The Tennessee Valley Authority says it spends about $8,000 a year for the pills near its Alabama and Tennessee reactors. When the potassium iodide deteriorates in storage, it is donated to aquariums as shark food.

News Notes

❶TMIA now has a quantity of brochures produced by NIRS (Nuclear Information and Resource Service) on transportation of nuclear waste that are appropriate for general discussion, classroom discussion, or citizen education. Call the TMIA office (233-7897) to request brochures.

❷Mitchell Rogovin, a Washington lawyer who directed the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's inquiry into the accident at Three Mile Island nuclear plant, died recently after a stroke. He will be remembered by many of us in Central PA for heading the TMI accident review panel that documented many of the problems that occurred before, during, and after the TMI Unit-2 accident.

❸"Building a Sustainable Future in Pennsylvania: A Conference on Sustainable Development" will be held March 25-26 at the Holiday Inn East, 4751 Lindle Road, Harrisburg. The conference, sponsored by Penn State Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, and several other Pennsylvania governmental agencies will examine sustainable development programs with an emphasis on those programs that have met the needs of both the business and environmental communities. Cost is $100 per person ($70/non-profit organization). Registration forms are available from TMIA or you may call Dr. Margaret Shaw, Penn State Harrisburg, Continuing Education, (717) 948-6505, for more information.

❹**Internet Resources on the WWW**

Nuclear Information and Resource Services (NIRS)
Fact Sheets, Alerts, Articles, reports, and other material for activists, Chernobyl+10 Home Page, Nuclear Monitor Online
http://www.essential.org./nirsnet/

Pennsylvania Environmental Network
Pennsylvania Environmental Network is a network of grassroots environmental groups throughout the state. PEN is a clearinghouse for information and technical expertise on organizing and on various issues of interest to the grassroots.
http://www.envirolink.org/orgs/pen/