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## Saved -- in Spite of Ourselves

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Things could still go wrong, but it looks likely, if not certain, that although the Missouri River floods that have been threatening Nebraska's Ft. Calhoun and Cooper nuclear power plants will put tremendous stress on both the systems and their operators, the immediate risk of a meltdown like those that occurred in Japan at Fukushima is small.

But it's also clear that if these same floods had occurred a year ago, before the Nuclear Regulatory Commission forced plant operators to upgrade safety standards, Ft. Calhoun, at least, would have been at serious meltdown risk. If the floods recede with no further damage to these plants, President Obama could, quite legitimately, claim that he saved Omaha. He probably won't, though, because the politics of doing so would reveal a deeper and more disturbing truth: while the Obama Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), led by Gregory Jaczko, has begun to take seriously the problems it inherited, America's fleet of 104 operating nuclear power plants is anything but safe.

Let's look at Ft. Calhoun and Cooper first. While a rubber berm at Ft. Calhoun has failed, causing flooding around the transformers and forcing the plant temporarily to rely on backup power, current projections for the flood peak are below the level of the newly reinforced levee system. The plant had also been shut down for other reasons in the spring and is not currently operating. Cooper is a bit higher and seems to be at less risk -- although any dam failure or other event greatly raising the levels of the river will mean that all bets are off.

All this is anything but reassuring. The flood level is expected to peak at 1,008 feet, below the current levee line of 1,014. But a year ago, the plant's flood protection was eight feet lower, meaning at 1,010 the main reactor area itself would have been flooded, and the NRC's inspectors concluded [the plant would fail](#):

NRC inspectors concluded that at flooding levels above 1,008 feet, the plant "would experience a loss of offsite power and loss of intake structure" and water pumps providing essential cooling water to the plant. In that case, "the plant would be incapable of reaching cold shutdown" with normal operations -- a fundamental safety requirement imposed by the NRC...

But when the NRC, last October, demanded that the Omaha Public Power District (OPPD) raise the flood barrier, the OPPD resisted and had to be forced to make the improvements over its strenuous objections. The final improvements were completed only on June 4.

And, as the OPPD has been pointing out in an attempt to reassure the public, this flooding is very different from the kind of unexpected, catastrophic event that hit Japan. Gary Gates, the CEO at Ft. Calhoun, [stoutly and correctly insisted](#), "It is not another Fukushima. The difference is the rapid flooding that occurred at Fukushima. This was a predicted event, to a degree, from the Corps of Engineers..."

Well and good. But how well would the Nebraska reactors have withstood an unexpected flooding event, one caused, for example, by a terrorist attack on one of the upstream dams? Or how would any of the 15 reactors that are [near the New Madrid Earthquake fault?](#) Past earthquakes on the New Madrid were powerful enough change the course of the Mississippi River -- certainly a flooding event that makes what is happening this week in Nebraska look like a mud puddle -- and those 15 nuclear plants are almost all located along major river systems.

The good news is that it [appears that the NRC has started taking this more seriously](#). Since Fukushima, the NRC has been reviewing its whole approach to safety. The agency will get the results of the staff review on July 12, with public release a week later, but the agency is signaling that, in the words of Martin Virgilio, deputy executive director for reactor and preparedness programs, "What we once thought was not necessary for adequate protection, may in fact become ..."

Among the key issues flagged are that many safety precautions against the worst disasters -- in which multiple systems fail simultaneously -- are voluntary, not mandatory, and that many plant operators do not consistently observe them. Additionally, it's now obvious that the kinds of failures that would result from intentional attacks were not adequately analyzed. In spite of this, the NRC's ingrained culture of deferring to utilities and defending the indefensible continues. Recently, for example, spokespeople have asserted that the probability of more extreme weather events because of climate change does not pose a risk because *new* nuclear power plants are built to withstand those kinds of weather extremes. [The real issue, of course, is not new plants, but existing ones.](#)

The bottom line is that how the NRC handles the new safety review is, arguably, one of the most important responsibilities facing the Obama administration. Will it get the attention it deserves?

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