



## Poll: Few confident US ready for nuclear emergency

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WASHINGTON — Most Americans doubt the U.S. government is prepared to respond to a nuclear emergency like the one in Japan, a new Associated Press-GfK poll shows. But it also shows few Americans believe such an emergency would occur.

Nevertheless, the disaster has turned more Americans against new nuclear power plants. The poll found that 60 percent of Americans oppose building more nuclear power plants. That's up from 48 percent who opposed it in an AP-Stanford University Poll in November 2009.

The Associated Press-GfK poll comes as Japan continues to struggle with a nuclear crisis caused by a March 11 earthquake and tsunami. The crippled Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant has leaked radiation into the environment and radioactive water gushed into the Pacific Ocean. Japan was rattled by a strong aftershock and tsunami warning Thursday, but officials reported no immediate sign of new problems.

The poll finds that about a fourth of those surveyed were highly confident that the U.S. government is prepared to handle a nuclear emergency, while almost three-fourths were only somewhat or not confident.

But many people doubt such an emergency will happen in this country.

About three in 10 think such an emergency is extremely or very likely, compared with seven in 10 who think it is only somewhat or not likely. Among people who think a disaster is highly likely, almost eight in 10 lack confidence the government would be ready.

Even among those think it's not too likely or not at all likely to happen, almost two-thirds still lacked confidence the government would be ready.

Nancy Hall of Long Beach, Calif., said the Japanese crisis has not soured her on nuclear power.

"Well, despite the disaster in Japan, I think that nuclear power still has a lot of advantages over fossil fuels," she said, noting that nuclear energy, unlike oil, does not funnel money to "Middle East dictators" and is not as polluting as coal-fired power plants.

"You have to keep in mind that gas and coal are constantly polluting, day in and day out, and we don't even think about it," she said.

Hall, 36, a linguistics professor, lives within a four-hour drive of two nuclear plants but said she is not too worried about either one.

"I do hope the government is looking carefully at how to safeguard them," she said. "But truthfully, nuclear power is not at the top of my list of worries." Of more immediate concern: The building where she works is not earthquake-proof.

The poll indicates that nearly one in four Americans lives within 50 miles of a nuclear power reactor. Those who reported living within 50 miles of a nuclear plant were not significantly more or less likely to have confidence in the government's ability to handle a nuclear disaster.

Those who live close to nuclear power plants were less likely to be strong opponents of building more nuclear power plants than those who live farther away. A total of four in 10 of those who live more than 50 miles from a plant strongly oppose building new ones, compared with three in 10 who say they live within 50 miles of a plant.

U.S. government regulators are reviewing safety at the nation's 104 nuclear reactors in the wake of the Japanese crisis. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission says it will look at the plants' ability to protect against natural disasters

and terrorist attacks, respond to complete power blackouts and cope with accidents involving spent fuel, among other issues.

The NRC says U.S. nuclear plants continue to operate safely.

Still, Kelli Hughes of Brookhaven, N.Y., worries about nuclear power, calling it a toxic menace. Hughes, 33, owns an online business and lives less than 80 miles from nuclear plants in New York and Connecticut. She said she strongly opposes construction or expansion of nuclear plants.

"We have to think about what it's going to do to the environment when we're done with it," she said, referring to nuclear waste. "Look what's happening in Japan now," she added. Radioactive waste "is leaking and it's toxic."

Once land is tainted by nuclear waste, "you can't use it," Hughes said. "It kills everything — the land, the air, the water around it."

Damian Padua of Chicopee, Mass., said he is skeptical that renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power can generate the electricity the country needs. Padua, 32, a printer, said the U.S. government and citizens alike are likely to be overwhelmed in the event of a nuclear disaster.

But after the initial shock, he said he is confident authorities and the public would rally.

"I think we have the necessary resources to help everyone," he said. "I think we can do a better job than the way it's going in Japan actually."

The Associated Press-GfK Poll was conducted March 24-28 by GfK Roper Public Affairs and Corporate Communications. It involved landline and cellphone interviews with 1,001 adults nationwide and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 4.2 percentage points.

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