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GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

From Mike Ahlers CNN Washington Bureau

“A congressional report takes a critical look at nuclear research reactors on college campuses.

The federal agency charged with safeguarding nuclear reactors has underestimated the potential for terrorists to attack small research reactors on college campuses as well as the potential impact of such attacks, congressional investigators said in a report released Tuesday.

Investigators said the Nuclear Regulatory Commission bases security requirements at the nation's research reactors on "questionable assumptions" and needs to reassess both threats and possible consequences.

But in a pointed response, the commission said the report by the Government Accountability Office is flawed and "misrepresents the considerable efforts made by the NRC" to improve security at research reactors after the September 11, 2001, attacks. PDF: Full GAO Report.

There are 37 research reactors in the United States. Four are operated by national laboratories under the jurisdiction of the Department of Energy. But the remaining 33 are on college campuses and are licensed and regulated by the federal nuclear commission.

Although research reactors are less powerful than commercial nuclear power reactors, they may nevertheless be targets for terrorists determined to steal reactor fuel for use in a nuclear weapon or dirty bomb, the GAO said. Or terrorists could sabotage a reactor to disperse radiation into neighboring communities, it added.

The GAO, the investigative arm of Congress, said the commission's security and emergency response requirements "are largely based on the regulations it had in place before September 11."

The NRC assumed that terrorists would use certain weapons and tactics in attacking a reactor but "did not fully consider alternative attack scenarios that could be more damaging," the GAO said.

The agency also assumed that only a small portion of a research reactor would be damaged in an attack, the report said.

The report identifies potential shortcomings at some of the reactors the agency's investigators visited. At one reactor, the GAO said, direct access to the reactor room was unlocked and unalarmed. It said the operator, which it did not identify in the public version of the report, was relying on "another security measure" that might be overcome."