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Nuclear Regulatory Standards Chat: Ask AP Reporter Jeff Donn Anything (LIVE Q&A)



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AP reporter Jeff Donn and the AP investigative unit [examined the state of nuclear regulatory standards](#) in the United States, finding that, "Federal regulators have been working closely with the nuclear power industry to keep the nation's aging reactors operating within safety standards by repeatedly weakening those standards, or simply failing to enforce them."

They also [found that](#), "Radioactive tritium has leaked from three-quarters of U.S. commercial nuclear power sites, often into groundwater from corroded, buried piping."

During [their investigation](#),

Tens of thousands of pages of government and industry studies were examined, along with test results, inspection reports and regulatory policy

statements filed over four decades. Interviews were conducted with scores of managers, regulators, engineers, scientists, whistleblowers, activists, and residents living near the reactors, which are located at 65 sites, mostly in the East and Midwest.

Today from 2 P.M. to 3 P.M, Jeff Donn is here to answer any questions you might have about his articles or nuclear regulation in the United States. **If you want to ask Jeff a question, leave a comment or tweet your question under the hashtag #nukechat. Ask away!**


live blog

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[Today 11:57 AM Thanks!](#) 

Closing Remark From Jeff Donn:

Thanks, all! Those were some thoughtful questions about a pretty complex topic. Please stay tuned for the rest of our series in coming days. Other aging issues to come.

[Today 11:54 AM How is Nuclear Safety Regulated In Comparison To Other Energy Sources?](#) 

Question from @jhausaman:

How does nuclear safety and regulation compare to other major energy sources? What about environmental standards?

Answer:

I'm no expert on other industries, but people in the nuclear industry sometimes say they are the most regulated of all industries. As our story yesterday reports, though, the regulators have repeatedly eased safety standards to keep aging plants within the rules. So many safety watchdogs say the Nuclear Regulatory Commission needs to be tougher and do more.

[Today 11:51 AM Where Would Nuclear Waste Go?](#) 

Question from @LauraConverses:

Where would the waste from a nuclear power plant leakage go? Would it be dumped in the ocean like Fukushima?

Answer:

In the US, there have historically been some places that have accepted low-level radioactive waste for disposal. It can also be treated, made less radioactive, and released into the plant surroundings at levels viewed as safe. In Japan, the contaminated water was leaking into the ocean because the operator couldn't find the source(s) of the

leak and stop it(them). The air near the reactors was so radioactive that workers couldn't get close enough to inspect what was going on.

[Today 11:41 AM What Agency Take Measurements of Radioactive Contamination?](#) 

Question from Endogenous Light Nexus:

I've recently learned that I live 11 miles downwind of Boeing's Santa Susana plant in California's San Fernando Valley, where a reactor melted down in 1964 and they had numerous releases of radioactive materials from testing nuclear rockets. Back then there were no regulatory controls and Boeing covered up the reactor meltdown with the help of the U.S. Government so that the public did not learn about the accident for decades. It MUST be the case then that much of the San Fernando Valley is contaminated with long-lived reactor radionuclides released from that accident. Do you know of any agency which has made measurements or is still making measurements of the radioactive contamination in the San Fernando Valley? I would like to know just how bad the lingering problem still is.

Answer:

Don't know about the valley specifically. There is a national network of radiation monitoring sites. That's where some of the reports of detectable radiation from Japan came in past months. I'd try Googling for radiation monitoring and EPA for starters.

[Today 11:37 AM What Questions Should We Be Asking To Those Accountable?](#) 

Question from @MacherM:

Most Americans are ignorant of Nuke reg details. What questions SHOULD we be asking to those accountable?

Answer:

So far as aging failures, we tried to ask those questions for you in the first two days of a continuing series beginning yesterday. The first part reports that federal regulators have been relaxing safety standards to keep aging nuclear plants within the rules. The second part today reports that three-quarters of nuclear plants have leaked radioactive tritium. Stand by for more in coming days.

[Today 11:33 AM Do You Think Indian Point Could Pose A Threat To NYC?](#) 

Question from @LauraConverses:

Indian Point is located on several fault lines, w/ its proximity to NYC do you think it poses a threat in a worst case scenario?

Answer:

There are at least two major fault lines that have been identified near Indian Point. A worst-case scenario at Indian Point would be having to evacuate many of the millions who live within 50 miles. That includes nearly all of New York City, and no one has ever tried an evacuation on that scale. The industry and Nuclear Regulatory Commission says it's enough to plan for possible evacuation within 10 miles. NRC scenarios suggest that the worst health harm would happen there, even in a severe accident. But it's worth noting that the US government recommended that all US nationals evacuate to at least 50 miles from the broken Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant in Japan earlier this year. And the NRC chairman suggested that we'd do the same in the same circumstances in the US.


Today 11:28 AM Do You Think The Media Fuel Fear Of Nuke Power? 

Question from @nicole_walcott:

Do you think news media fuel the fear of nuke power in their attempt to feed america's appetite with media coverage?

Answer:

We try to report on potential problems as accurately as we can. We try to put things in the right context. To be sure, people have strong feelings and it's a hard issue to cover.

Today 11:25 AM It Doesn't Seem Like Any Changes Have Been Made In The US Since Fukushima. 

Question from Ace Hoffman:

It's been ~100 days since Fukushima, yet not one significant change has been made at any nuclear power plant in America. Not one has been closed for retrofit, not one license extension has been denied. From a regulatory viewpoint thus far, it's as if Fukushima never happened.

Answer:

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission says it's taking a careful look at the implications for all US plants. A report is due in July. The NRC chairman says he expects there WILL be some changes. Wait and see.


Today 11:22 AM Has There Been A News Blackout Regarding Calhoun? 

Question from Bergen2:

Has there really been a news blackout regarding the recent catastrophic loss of cooling and the flooding at the Fort Calhoun Nuclear Power Plant in Nebraska? Do federal regulators have the authority to issue news blackouts? Can you speak to this article: <http://bit.ly/k5r1gC> regarding this same 'event' which has not been covered in the MSM?

Answer:

Sorry, don't have time to study the article, but I cannot imagine how the government could issue a news blackout. There's the First Amendment and all. And I believe I saw news reports on Fort Calhoun.


[Today 11:16 AM Are There Enough Uranium Deposits To Support Nuclear Power Worldwide?](#) 

Question from AtlasV:

I just graduated from college and I very clearly remember one of my professors explaining to us that there aren't enough known uranium deposits to support a large scaling-up of nuclear power worldwide. Any take on this?

Answer:

Sorry, dunno. But I know where are tons and tons of spent (used) nuclear fuel sitting in fuel pools at the US plants. The federal government was supposed to create a national repository, but it hasn't happened. The spent fuel remains radioactive and very hot. It was the source of much of the contamination in the air around the Japanese plant, as opposed to contamination from inside the reactor core itself.


[Today 11:15 AM Are You Receiving Any Pressure At all To Censor Or Limit Your Reports?](#) 

Question from Libbe HaLevy:

Are you receiving any pressure at all to censor or limit your reports? Any resistance from papers to carry your reports?

Answer:

No.

[Today 11:13 AM How Quickly Would Americans Be Informed If Reactors Were Leaking?](#) 

Question from Kathy Maynard Cournoyer on Facebook:

how quickly would Americans be informed if the reactors WERE in danger of leaking?

Answer:

If the leaks were thought to endanger public health, both the operator and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission would be expected to report that quickly and publicly. But few radioactive leaks are deemed to pose a public health risk. Remember: there's some radioactivity all around the environment. It's a question of how much. Many leaks NOT viewed as public health dangers still get reported by plant operators in alerts called a "preliminary notification of an event or unusual occurrence." They include events that

could endanger public health, but also some events that the public is simply interested in know. You can find those at nrc.gov.


[Today 11:06 AM What Right Does The Public Have To Remove a Nuclear Generating Station?](#) 

Question from Harold One Feather:

What right does the public have in removing a nuclear generating station from their backyards?

Answer:

Vermont is the only state where the state legislature has the power to close a nuclear plant. Upset about leaks of radioactive tritium, Vermont's state Senate voted to do that for Vermont Yankee nuclear, but the plant's operator has challenged in federal court.

[Today 11:04 AM Any Chance Fracking Will Cause An Earthquake Capable Of Disrupting A PA Power Plant?](#) 

Question from den1953"

I would like to know if there is any remote chance fracking in PA will cause a Earthquake large enough to disrupt any Nuclear power plant built near the River in central PA?

Answer:

Afraid I don't have any idea. But remember that it was the tsunami, not the earthquake, that caused the nuclear crisis in Japan at Fukushima Dai-ichi. The plant there appeared to be OK until the tsunami knocked out backup power.

[Today 10:57 AM Are There Any Known Risks At Watts Bar In Spring City, TN?](#) 

Question from: @p37361

Mr Donn, are there any known risks at my neighbor, watts bar, in Spring City, TN, that I should be concerned with?

Answer:

Today's story cites a tritium leak at Watts Barr in 2005. It was measured at 397,000 picocuries per liter. It wasn't in drinking water, but if it had been, that's 20 times the EPA drinking water standard for tritium.

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