

The New York Times

Green

A Blog About Energy and the Environment

OCTOBER 29, 2010, 3:48 PM

U.S. Nuclear Plants Get the Iraq Treatment

By [MATTHEW L. WALD](#)

Exelon The Peach Bottom Nuclear Station in Pennsylvania operates two reactors. The International Atomic Energy Agency, perhaps best known to Americans for inspecting nuclear sites in Iraq, has spent the last two weeks in the United States. Rather than Tuwaitha, the notorious facility south of Baghdad, it has been passing time in Peach Bottom, Pa., and Lower Alloways Creek, N.J. And in general, it liked what it saw, said Jukka Laaksonen, director general of Finland's nuclear safety authority and the head of the delegation.

The inspections in Iraq between the two wars that coalition forces fought there were intended to sniff out any illicit weapons activities. In the United States, the agency embarked on a “[peer review](#)” at the invitation of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The delegation of 14 experts from around the world, three observers and three agency staff members was invited to size up how well the American authorities monitor civilian power plants, including plant operations, and how the agency communicates internally.

Mr. Laaksonen said he was particularly impressed that each American reactor had its own “[probabilistic risk assessment](#),” an analytical tool meant to predict the sequence of errors or equipment failures that could lead to an accident and to pinpoint vulnerabilities.

Last studied in the mid-1990's, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission was eager to show off a reformed procedure for overseeing reactors that is highly systematized and meant to prevent the biases of individual inspectors from influencing results.

The group will not present its report for several months. In a preliminary statement, it said that the United States had “a transparent licensing process that accepts input from public citizens and environmental reviews, and ensures that key documents are publicly available.”

If that conclusion appears in the final report, it may raise eyebrows among American critics who say that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has become substantially less open in recent years. In fact, some reviews of plant operations have passed out of government hands and are done by a private industry group, the Institute of Nuclear Power Operations, on a peer-to-peer basis. The institute is not subject to the disclosure rules that apply to the commission.

The group also said the commission should consider “increasing its effort to use I.A.E.A. safety standards in its own regulations” but was not specific about the differences.

Beyond the actual evaluation, the inspection was an effort by the United States to encourage international collaboration, said [Gregory B. Jaczko](#), the commission chairman. “The team’s visit sends an important signal internationally -- this sort of examination of a nation’s regulatory system can advance the cause of nuclear safety not just in one nation but across the globe,” he said.

The industry and the regulators are eager to look over one another’s shoulders across national boundaries because of concern that a serious accident anywhere would stunt the technology everywhere.

In fact, the agency, which generally has no authority to send in inspectors, is scheduled to visit Romania, South Korea and Switzerland in the next few months as well as Poland, which is new to nuclear power.