



Nuclear Agency Tells a Concerned Congress That U.S. Industry Remains Safe

By MATTHEW L. WALD
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WASHINGTON — Facing questions about the implications of Japan's nuclear catastrophe for power plants in the United States, the [Nuclear Regulatory Commission's](#) top official said Wednesday at two Congressional hearings that his agency would take a methodical look at Japan and incorporate lessons from the disaster.



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Philip Scott Andrews/The New York Times
Gregory Jaczko, the chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, testified in front of the the House Energy Committee.

The pledge from the official, Gregory Jaczko, the commission's chairman, drew praise and criticism that was often consonant with a lawmaker's political position on nuclear power and other forms of energy.

"U.S. nuclear facilities remain safe," Mr. Jaczko [told two House Energy and Commerce subcommittees](#), which had originally planned to consider his agency's budget for the coming fiscal year at the hearing. "We will continue to work to maintain that level of protection."

Reactors are designed to meet the challenges of "the most severe natural phenomena historically reported," he said. For earthquakes, that means any that occur within 200 miles of the reactor, and a margin of error, he said.

While it remains unclear if the crisis at Fukushima will be as serious as the Chernobyl nuclear plant explosion in Ukraine in 1986, it will have much more direct implications for the American civilian power plant industry. At the time of the accident in Ukraine, then ruled by the Soviet Union, the United States had only one reactor that remotely resembled the Soviet one, and it was soon closed.

Yet a score of reactors in this country are very similar to the ones in Japan.

Some members of the committee seemed satisfied with Mr. Jaczko's replies and turned to a variety of other energy questions. "I personally believe that [nuclear energy](#) must be part of any portfolio of renewable energy sources that will fuel this country moving forward," said Representative Bobby L. Rush of Illinois, the ranking Democrat on the Subcommittee on Energy and Power of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

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On the Senate side, [Barbara Boxer](#), the California Democrat who is chairwoman of the Environment and Public Works Committee, told Mr. Jaczko that his agency should

consider shutting down some older plants until more was known about the shortcomings of the reactors in Japan and the dimensions of the crisis. "I'm looking at you for more leadership than I've gotten," she said.

The secretary of energy, [Steven Chu](#), took a position similar to Mr. Jaczko's in testimony at the House hearing. "We are going to be looking very, very closely at the events happening in Japan and take those lessons," he said.

"You can be assured, with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission leading, but the Department of Energy providing any assistance, to look again at the current, existing nuclear power plants and any that are being considered."

Representative [Joe L. Barton](#), Republican of Texas, badgered Dr. Chu on whether the administration still favored federal help for new reactors. Dr. Chu gave a professorial answer, but Mr. Barton cut him off and cornered him into whittling his response down to one word, "yes."

"That's what I wanted you to say," Mr. Barton said.

Representative [Henry A. Waxman](#), Democrat of California, was not satisfied.

"We do have a problem that now, so much of our eggs are in the nuclear basket," he said, referring to the nation's reliance on nuclear power for roughly 20 percent of its electricity.

"After Chernobyl, many said such an event could not happen in the U.S., because the Soviet Union's nuclear sector was not as advanced as our own," Mr. Waxman said. "But Japan is a highly developed country. It is as technologically sophisticated as us, and there's much concern in the U.S. that a similar accident could here."

Representative [Edward J. Markey](#), Democrat of Massachusetts, renewed calls for delaying the licensing of a new reactor, the Westinghouse AP1000, until everyone was satisfied about its ability to perform in earthquakes.

Last month the Nuclear Regulatory Commission signaled that it was moving toward approving the reactor design, which would be deployed for projects like an expansion of Plant Vogtle in Georgia, where holes have been dug for two AP1000 reactors.

Mr. Jaczko tried to explain to the House committee that his agency did not require reactors to be designed to meet an earthquake of a certain magnitude, but rather the likely ground-shaking motion at their locations. He demonstrated by filling a glass half full of water and thumping his hand on the table to make the water move.

Representative Lois Capps, a California Democrat, complained that the commission had stopped short of considering the possibility of near-simultaneous catastrophes, like an earthquake and a tsunami. "We have just witnessed an earthquake, a tsunami and a meltdown," she said.

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