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**The San Onofre Nukes and the M Word**

by Michael Steinberg ( [blackrainpress \[at\] hotmail.com](mailto:blackrainpress[at]hotmail.com) )  
Sunday Jan 18th, 2009 4:06 PM

Last December we learned that critical safety systems at the San Onofre Nuclear Power Station were potentially threatened by a disabled battery--and had been for almost 5 years. Could this have lead to a meltdown at the plants?

Fortunately for us, the San Onofre nukes ended last year with a whimper rather than a bang. Or a meltdown.

The same could be said for 2007, 2006, 2005 and 2004.

Because that's how long a comatose battery sat there unnoticed and undermaintained. Not just any battery either. One that could've been called upon to prevent such a catastrophic event.

But none reporting on this disgrace could bring themselves to use the M Word to describe the potential threat.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) stated, in a December report, that its inspectors "found that the battery used to supply power to the plant safety systems under some accident conditions, was inoperable between 2004 and 2008 because of loose electrical connections caused by inadequate maintenance instructions (Reuters 12-22)."

Uh, what safety systems might that be? And which accident conditions? Would they have anything to do with the M Word?

Based on the NRC's info, one could only wonder.

Actually, I did consequently pose those questions to the NRC. Repeatedly. But I've received no reply.

The North County Times, however (also on 12-22) provided a very significant clue to my unanswered questions, reporting that the dysfunctional battery was supposed to "provide backup power to critical pumps at the coastal nuclear plant."

Aha! Now we're getting warmer. Maybe even hotter.

Because such pumps would be used to flood a nuclear reactor when its nuclear core threatens to become uncovered. Without a constant water cover, nuclear fuel can continue to heat up, until--dare I say it--it begins to melt down.

The China Syndrome, they used to call it, a Three Mile Island. Billions of curies of lethal radiation escaping into the environment.

Another Chernobyl, they used to call it.

Simpler put, byebye Southern California.

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Back in 1982, the federal Sandia National Laboratory released a study entitled "Consequences of a Reactor Accident," breaking down the deaths, injuries and property damages that could be caused by a meltdown at each commercial nuclear power reactor in the US.

For San Onofre Unit 1, it calculated 8000 "peak early fatalities, 6000 "peak injuries," 10,000 "peak cancer deaths," and \$58.8 billion in property damages.

For Unit 2, the corresponding figures were 27,000, 23,000, 18,000 and \$186 billion. The numbers for Unit 3 were virtually the same as for 2.

Of course since 1982 Unit 1 has permanently shut down, but it still has lots of high level radwaste in its spent fuel pool that could melt down if uncovered and cause similar catastrophic consequences.

Also since 1982 the population around San Onofre has increased tremendously, meaning the death and injury figures would be much higher. And those '82 amounts of property damages would add up to many many more billions of today's dollars.

That Sandia study was the only official examination of the consequences of meltdowns at US nuke plants.

It Can't Happen Here?

Of course, other functional safety systems were in place while that battery was "inoperable" (as far we know), and no meltdown happened.

But the fact remains, that had that battery been called upon as the one needed to power those critical pumps, because other ones couldn't be counted on at the time...no, we don't really want to go there, do we?

No need to worry though, the NRC is on the case and says it's stepping up scrutiny at San Onofre.

Of course that's what the agency purported in January '08, while revealing that, among other problems discovered, "An employee at San Onofre nuclear power plant...falsified records for five years [2001-2005] to show that hourly fire patrols were made, when in fact they were not (TV-10, 1-14-08)."

Similar claims were also made back in 2006, when "Radiation levels 16 times higher than allowed in drinking water were discovered...beneath Unit 1 at the San Onofre Generating Station, which last operated in 1992 (Orange County Register, 8-17-06)."

Nevertheless, a pattern of deterioration at the plant continues. In another example, last August the LA Times reported, "Injury rates put [San Onofre] 'dead last' among US nuclear plants when it comes to industrial safety, plant managers told employees in an Aug. 4 newsletter, provided by one of the plant's labor unions (8-19-08)."

And in the current case of the 4-year battery disconnect, plant workers finally discovered the problem last March.

But the NRC, whose primary duty is supposed to be protecting the public's health and safety, did not go public with the scandal until 9 months later.

And that wasn't until December 22, when the public was much more concerned with how much more it could squeeze out of its credit cards for the holidays than about potential nuclear disasters.

Meanwhile, the meltdown at San Onofre continues—both in critical safety systems at the plant, and of public confidence in it.

Michael Steinberg, a former San Diego resident, writes on nuclear power issues for Z Magazine and is the author of *Millstone and Me: Sex, Lies and Radiation in Southeastern Connecticut*.

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