

## **"French nukes are safe" – A sound byte with no evidence**

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May 26, 2009

We hear it all the time. Nuclear reactors produce 80% of the electricity in France. Their reactors are "safe" and that means the U.S. should build new reactors.

This is the sound byte. But are reactors truly "safe" as advertised? After studying the facts, the answer is an emphatic "no."

In France, politics has overwhelmed science in defining "safe." For nearly 30 years after French reactors began operating, not one medical journal article was published on cancer rates near reactors. Intimidated by the power of the nuclear industry, French health officials didn't dare look for dirty laundry, even though over 100 radioactive chemicals – the same in atomic bomb fallout – were routinely being released into the air and water.

The topic of cancer near French reactors only surfaced in the mid-1990s, when public health professor Jean-Francois Viel published three journal articles. Viel documented a cluster of child leukemia near the La Hague plant in Normandy. La Hague doesn't produce electricity, but reprocesses nuclear waste, a dirty and dangerous method that releases substantial radioactivity. Viel showed the more children used local beaches, and the more their families ate local sea food, the greater their risk of developing leukemia.

The bubble of the "safe" French nukes had finally burst. French nuclear leaders were furious, and scurried to minimize the damage. They first blasted Viel in letters to journals, severely criticizing his methods and conclusions. Next, a panel assembled by the French health and environment ministers quickly issued a report declaring no cancer cluster existed at La Hague. Articles on cancer rates near French reactors were published by French officials at long last - all concluding rates weren't high.

The French government won't part with a single euro for studies of cancer near nukes. Its only interest in the topic is political, i.e. to discredit any evidence of a radiation-cancer link, and preserve the good name of their multi-billion dollar industry. The task of conducting objective studies is left to independent researchers who risk incurring the wrath of nuclear leaders. The bullying generally works; aside from a few courageous people like Viel, most researchers won't dare cross

paths with the French nuclear giant.

Understanding whether nukes are “safe” begins with some basic data, and official French statistics show cancer is a serious problem. Of 39 European nations, its 2006 cancer incidence rate is 3rd and 13th highest for men and women. Its cancer incidence rate rose 39% from 1980-2005, compared to only a 10% rise in the U.S. But despite these high and rising rates, officials acknowledge that little is known on what causes cancer.

Perhaps most telling is that the rate of thyroid cancer in France rose a staggering 433% and 186% for males and females, far more than U.S. increases. This may be the smoking gun; doctors know of no other clear-cut cause of thyroid cancer, other than radiation exposure. Prior studies showed high rates in Japanese atomic bomb survivors, persons downwind of bomb tests in Nevada and the south Pacific, and Chernobyl-area residents.

French researchers, with the long shadow of industry and government looming, were silent for many years, as the thyroid cancer toll mounted. The damage control team finally sprang into action in 2004; a journal article claimed French doctors were diagnosing the disease better than in the past. This claim is dubious, as many thyroid cancers are found after doctors feel an unusual lump in the patient’s neck during routine physicals. There is no evidence that physicians are more skilled at this, or that more people are getting routine physicals. Naturally, the article made no mention of reactors.

A second smoking gun to the nuke-cancer connection is childhood cancer, as fetuses, infants, and children suffer the greatest harm from a dose of radiation. A 2007 review of 17 studies on child cancer near nuclear plants worldwide found rates above normal in all 17. Last year, a German government panel found high child cancer rates in that country based on 1592 cases, the largest study of child cancer near reactors. Within weeks, the French nuclear hierarchy fired off an article claiming child leukemia rates near French reactors – its first – were not abnormally high. The study was based on just 114 cases.

The propaganda campaign that nukes are “safe” is also active in the U.S. The pro-reactor camp has its cultural roots in the atomic bomb tests during the Cold War arms race with the Soviet Union. For decades, government leaders declared that bomb test fallout was harmless. They used the familiar tools of conducting no studies to support their claim, suppressing data, and lashing out against

scientists who dared suggest otherwise.

As in France, for nearly 30 years after the first U.S. nuclear power reactors were built, no studies of cancer near reactors were done. In the late 1980s, Senator Edward M. Kennedy mandated such a study; but the National Cancer Institute, much like its French counterpart, found “no evidence that an excess occurrence of cancer has resulted from living near nuclear facilities.” But actually, much evidence in the study did suggest a link. Federal officials have ignored the topic ever since.

The burden of proof again fell on independent scientists who dare take on government and industry. Several studies using official statistics show high cancer rates near U.S. reactors – especially childhood cancer and thyroid cancer. Another study showed levels of radioactive Strontium-90 (produced in reactors) in baby teeth were considerably higher near reactors. Other studies showed that when nuclear reactors closed, local rates of infant deaths and child cancers plunged immediately.

But in spite of this evidence, U.S. nuclear leaders are pushing hard to expand. Although no U.S. reactors have been ordered since 1978, there are proposals in the pipeline to order 32 more. Reprocessing of nuclear waste, which was tried at a plant near Buffalo NY but scrapped by the Ford and Carter Administrations, has been proposed again.

The would-be nuclear revival in the U.S. is aided by Areva, the mostly state-owned company that operates French reactors. Areva has teamed up with Constellation Energy to try to build a new reactor at Calvert Cliffs MD, just 45 miles from Washington DC.

With the nuclear industry hoping for a large expansion, knowing the risks of reactors must be based on science, not politics. People may be suffering from radiation exposure, but also from lies and deception. The prudent course is to not declare the French experience “safe” until all the facts are in, and making truly safe policy decisions.

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Published in: The Free Press, truth @freepress.org Nov 3, 2009