RICHARD T. SCHULZE
5TH DISTRICT, PENNSYLVANIA

WAYS AND MEANS
COMMITTEE

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives • Washington, DC 20515

August 5, 1986

Mr. Harold Denton
Director, Office of Nuclear
Reactor Regulation
Nuclear Regulatory Commission
1717 H. Street, NW
Washington, DC 20555

Dear Mr. Denton:

I am enclosing a letter from some of my constituents regarding an article in the Wall Street Journal regarding the GE Mark I Containment System. I believe the attached is self-explanatory.

Any comments you can provide my Paoli, Pennsylvania office regarding this matter would be greatly appreciated and most helpful to responding to my constituent.

Many thanks for your kind attention to this matter, and with best wishes, I am

Sincerely,

Dick Schulze

DICK SCHULZE
Member of Congress

DS:cs
Enclosure

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PLEASE RESPOND TO:

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(1911-1975)

FREDERICK L. RAKER
(1916-1979)

July 25, 1986

The Honorable Richard T. Schulze
2 East Lancaster Avenue
Paoli, PA 19301

Dear Representative Schulze:

We are enclosing herewith an article which appeared in the Wall Street Journal on Tuesday, July 22, 1986, regarding nuclear reactor containment systems designed by General Electric. We and our families live and work in the shadow of the Limerick Nuclear Power Plant operated by Philadelphia Electric Company. The possibility that the containment system at Limerick is not sufficient to protect our community in the event of a "serious" accident is very alarming.

We were dissatisfied, to say the least, with the comments by Harold Denton of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission that it would be paying "a lot of attention" to utilities' efforts to deal with the issue. What does this mean? If the Commission has determined that these containment systems would fail in nine out of ten types of severe accidents, why are the utilities not being ordered to correct the problems immediately? It seems as though we are placing a great deal of faith in the NRC to protect our health and property but after reading this article, we are not convinced that this faith is fully justified.

There is growing concern in our community and perhaps nationwide that we are at the mercy of the utility companies operating these reactors. Currenty, property insurance is unavailable from any source to protect us from nuclear accidents.

We believe a congressional investigation is in order to look into at least the two issues we are raising in this letter.

1) Why, if the NRC has determined these containment systems to be unsafe in serious accidents, is it not demanding immediate correction of the problems?

2) Why have no provisions been made for insurance to protect private property in the event of a nuclear accident?

We are anxious for your response.

Very truly yours,

Richard E. Wells

Arthur F. Loeben, Jr.

Thomas L. Hoffman

R. Kurtz Holloway

Monica A. Hulligan

Nuclear Reactor Containment System GE Designed Is Flawed, NRC Aide Says

By Bill Paul
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission will report in September that the containment shell on certain nuclear reactors designed by General Electric Co. would fail in nine out of 10 types of severe accidents, an NRC official said.

There are about two dozen such commercial reactors in the U.S., of which about 18 are currently operating.

Wayne Houston, deputy director of the NRC's Boiling Water Reactor Division, said the agency has urged utilities with GE's Mark I containments to make modifications that could cost several million dollars per reactor. But he said that for now, the NRC isn't ordering any safety changes, nor does it intend to shut down any reactors. Moreover, he said it would be "economically unfeasible" to make "really major changes" that would upgrade the safety of the shell.

"It is perhaps a little scary for the public" to learn that GE's Mark I containment system has such a high probability of failure, Mr. Houston said in an interview. But, he added, the chances of an accident occurring that would test the containment system are "still are quite low."

The NRC's Mark I conclusions are part of a "risk reassessment" study that the commission has been conducting on about half a dozen types of nuclear reactors. The reassessment comes in the wake of new and sometimes conflicting scientific data on how much and how fast radioactive material might be released into the atmosphere during a major accident.

The study, which Mr. Houston said was more detailed than a similar study that reached the same conclusion 11 years ago, is sure to cause disputes. In the wake of the recent Chernobyl disaster, which involved a Soviet-designed reactor that didn't have any such containment shell and thus quickly released radioactive material into the atmosphere, anti-nuclear groups called for a shutdown of U.S. reactors that have GE Mark I containments. They also want Congress to investigate.

A spokesman for GE, of Fairfield, Conn., declined to comment, maintaining that this is a matter between the NRC and the utilities.

Meanwhile, utilities with GE reactors have charged that the NRC's assessment is scientifically flawed and that the projected failure rate is "way, way less" than 90%, according to Cordell Reed, vice president, nuclear operations, of Commonwealth Edison Co. in Chicago, which has four GE reactors.

Other utilities that have reactors with Mark I containments include Carolina Power & Light Co., Southern Co.'s Georgia Power Co. unit, Philadelphia Electric Co., Northeast Utilities and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Nuclear industry officials say the problem with the Mark I appears to be that it is too small and wasn't designed to withstand the high pressures it is supposed to resist. In the past, GE has maintained that its containment is adequately designed.

In general, in a "serious" accident the fuel core of the reactor, which normally is surrounded by water, would be at least partly exposed because of a steam-pipe rupture or other breakdown, with the radioactive elements taking a gaseous form. The pressure of the steam inside the reactor would build to a point where the concrete shell would crack, allowing radioactive gases to escape into the atmosphere. Containment shells are supposed to prevent radioactivity from escaping, but the Mark I shell may not be able to do so, the report is expected to contend.

Harold Denton, director of the NRC's Office of Nuclear Regulation, recently fueled the Mark I controversy when he told a group of utilities that the NRC will be paying "a lot of attention" to utilities' efforts to deal with the issue.

Mr. Reed maintains that the real problem lies in the testing procedures of Sandia National Laboratories, the federal testing facility in Albuquerque, N.M., which the NRC is using for its Mark I investigation. Mr. Reed said Sandia hasn't sufficiently considered what an operator would do to mitigate the effects of a severe accident in the first critical hours. He said an operator generally would be able to prevent a release of radioactive material by venting and filtering before the pressure inside the reactor built to a point at which the containment shell was imperiled.