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General Electric Stockholders to urge national dialogue about risks of nuclear power at GE Annual Meeting, April 25 in Detroit

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A “Resolution Urging General Electric to Withdraw from Nuclear Energy” will be on the agenda at the GE Annual Meeting on April 25 at downtown Detroit’s Renaissance Center. It was submitted by the GE Stockholders’ Alliance (GESA), based in Tucson, Arizona. (More about GESA is at the end of this Press Release.)

The massive destruction caused by the earthquake, tsunami, and reactor meltdowns and explosions at Japan’s Fukushima Daiichi nuclear complex is the most recent warning and challenge to reevaluate the irreversible hazards of using atomic power to generate electricity. For GE shareholders, the catastrophe that began in Japan in March 2011 was especially significant because the destroyed reactors were all designed by the General Electric Company. Twenty-three of the same GE Mark I boiling water reactors are still in operation in the U.S.

In June 2011 the Associated Press published a series of articles summarizing its year-long investigation of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and nuclear power industry. The AP concluded that the NRC often relaxes or ignores its regulations rather than requiring utilities to install expensive safety upgrades, or to permanently shut down dangerously designed or degraded reactors.

Three GE senior reactor engineers had resigned in 1976 because of their concerns about the GE Mark I boiling water reactors. They testified in Congress, before a Joint Senate/House Committee on Atomic Energy, about design deficiencies, and submitted recommendations that were ignored. Even though the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission had first acknowledged the inherent risks of the Mark I design in 1972, the AEC nevertheless continued to permit the construction and operation of the Mark I reactors.

The Mark I reactors are now approaching, or have even exceeded, the end of their designed life and original 40-year operating licenses. Engineers know that the constant bombardment by radioactive particles and rays causes the embrittlement of the containment vessel and related parts. Pipes get plugged, parts corrode, concrete crumbles, pumps fail, leaks happen. And yet U.S. electric utilities have requested 20-year extensions of their reactors’ operating licenses. To date, the NRC has granted a license extension for every one of the 72 applications, including for 22 of the 23 Mark I reactors. The NRC has also failed to require any of the safety upgrades to the older reactors that are now uniformly required of proposed new reactors. In addition, most utilities have requested, and been granted, the right to increase the power level for most of these aging reactors (including at 22 of the 23 Mark I reactors).

Of especially high risk at every atomic reactor is the irradiated nuclear fuel storage pool. When a reactor’s fuel storage pool has become filled to its designed capacity, the licensees have routinely re-racked the nuclear fuel, packing in far more rods than the pool was designed to accommodate. The fuel pools were initially designed to store the fuel for just several years, but because no permanent disposal site or commercial fuel reprocessing plant exists in the U.S., some of the pools have already been storing the highly radioactive fuel for decades. The power supply needed for every pool’s essential cooling water pumps is especially vulnerable. Critics worry that if, whether due to natural disaster, accident, or
intentional attack, both the off-site and on-site emergency back-up power supplies were to be destroyed, as happened at Fukushima, the pool’s cooling water could boil or drain away, causing a radioactive inferno outside of radiological containment structures. The U.S. Mark I reactors store far more irradiated fuel rods than their Japanese twins. For example, the Fermi 2 Mark I reactor, just 35 miles south of Detroit, holds well over 500 tons of irradiated rods in its storage pool, more than the amount at the four destroyed Fukushima Daiichi reactors put together (354 tons).

“It is unconscionable to continue to generate more highly radioactive waste for which no safe technology or location exists to isolate it from the biosphere, and may never exist,” says Patricia Birnie, Chair of the GESA.

Because of the ongoing accident at Fukushima, political leaders and citizens around the world are re-evaluating the risks of nuclear power. Germany, Spain, Italy and Switzerland have already chosen to phase out nuclear power, by either shutting down old reactors or not building new ones. In Japan, 53 of the nation’s 54 atomic reactors are currently not operating, as local governments, under popular pressure, refuse to allow restarts. The final Japanese reactor is due to shut down for scheduled maintenance in May, which would leave Japan a nuclear-free zone.

Siemens, the large German corporation, is phasing out its nuclear reactor manufacturing. Our association of GE shareholders is urging GE also to withdraw from the design, fabrication, and promotion of nuclear reactors. Instead GE should encourage electric utilities to purchase and install our company’s solar, wind, geothermal and other renewable, energy-efficient generating systems.

The challenges of the climate crisis demand that corporations act responsibly to help create a sustainable future, through safe, secure, clean and cost-effective renewable and efficiency technologies.

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The GE Stockholders’ Alliance (GESA) was formed in 1980 and consists of individual and institutional General Electric stockholders who believe that the Company would be stronger financially, serve its worldwide customers and stockholders better, and contribute to a cleaner, safer environment if it withdraws from Nuclear Energy and instead places its institutional talents and resources on renewable energy and energy efficiency. Through the years GESA has submitted shareholder resolutions focused on the dangers of nuclear energy, the benefits of renewables, and the wisdom of promoting GE’s environmental stewardship and cleanup technologies.

We commend GE on its continuing advances in solar technology, wind power systems, and energy-efficient products.

We believe GE has an opportunity and an obligation to provide leadership in phasing out dirty, dangerous and expensive nuclear power.

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For more details on the risks of the GE Mark I reactors, please see Beyond Nuclear’s pamphlet “Freeze Our Fukushimas: A Campaign to Close US GE Mark I Boiling Water Reactors,” as well as its “Freeze Our Fukushimas” campaign website.

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