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States might allow high doses of radiation to public before evacuating from a nuclear accident during viral pandemic

Suppressed nuclear emergency plans during COVID-19 cause for concern says Beyond Nuclear

TAKOMA PARK, MD, JULY 2, 2020—Hospital patients and residents of nursing homes within ten miles of a nuclear power plant might not be evacuated during a major accident that occurs during a viral pandemic, until radiation exposure reached levels 50 times higher than levels considered to initiate evacuation, a state of Connecticut document has revealed.

These revelations were contained in an [April 9, 2020](#) attachment to a document that briefly surfaced and then abruptly [disappeared](#) from the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) website. In it, the State of Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) Radiation Division said the social distancing necessities of the viral pandemic comprised “a significant impediment to an orderly evacuation” should a major nuclear accident occur.

Connecticut is home to the two-unit Millstone nuclear power plant on the Long Island Sound.

The DEEP statement revealed that, should a nuclear accident occur during a pandemic, the state proposed to raise the allowable radiation exposure to the general public to more than 12 times the [threshold radiation dose](#) (2 rem) currently recommended for evacuation by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines.

For hospital and nursing home patients, Connecticut plans to delay evacuation until exposure levels exceed 100 rem, the point at which people would start experiencing radiation poisoning.

The Connecticut document was a response to a nationwide assessment by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), of the viability of offsite radiological emergency plans for operating nuclear power stations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It is deeply disturbing that any authority in charge of public health would consider raising allowable radiation exposure doses to 100 rem,” said Cindy Folkers, Beyond Nuclear radiation and health specialist.

“Even the 2 rem standard is misleading and not safe,” added Folkers. “As the National Academy of Sciences maintains, there is no safe dose, but women, fetuses, babies and young children are more susceptible to harm from radiation. Raising the radiation exposure threshold at all, let alone to 100 rem, the level of onset for radiation sickness which can include vomiting and hair loss, is irresponsible in the extreme,” she said.

When FEMA Region 1, which handles Millstone and the Seabrook reactor in New Hampshire, reissued its June 2 statement on June 15, the Connecticut document was no longer attached. However, the agency document maintains that “offsite radiological emergency preparedness

remains adequate to provide 'Reasonable Assurance' and that appropriate measures can be taken to protect the health and safety of the public in a radiological emergency."

No other responses from other states have been published by the NRC or FEMA, although in a recent teleconference with the agencies and industry, a FEMA official referenced an unpublished response from the state of Iowa — home to the Duane Arnold reactor.

"The public has a right to know what federal and state authorities have cooked up for them if a nuclear accident occurs while this pandemic is raging," said Paul Gunter, Director of the Reactor Oversight Project for Beyond Nuclear. "If the additional state assessments are being withheld from the public record, that is cause for serious concern.

"We don't know if Iowa is thinking along the same lines as Connecticut," Gunter continued. "If the Connecticut example turns out to be typical, or the precedent, we are looking at the risk of significant radiation exposure being the acceptable plan as a trade off to avoid exposure to the viral threat. Either way it's an impossible choice."

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Beyond Nuclear is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit membership organization. Beyond Nuclear aims to educate and activate the public about the connections between nuclear power and nuclear weapons and the need to abolish both to safeguard our future. Beyond Nuclear advocates for an energy future that is sustainable, benign and democratic. The Beyond Nuclear team works with diverse partners and allies to provide the public, government officials, and the media with the critical information necessary to move humanity toward a world beyond nuclear. Beyond Nuclear: 7304 Carroll Avenue, #182, Takoma Park, MD 20912. Info@beyondnuclear.org. www.beyondnuclear.org