Nuclear Dinosaur Best Left Dead

By Linda Gunter

There is a reason why scientists are not busy trying to recreate dinosaurs from DNA. It would not be in the best interests of human health and safety. Now the Bush administration is trying to revive another dinosaur – nuclear power. The same rule applies: Not in our best interest

Consider the reasons.

Every operating nuclear reactor contains enough plutonium to build 40 atomic bombs. That sounds like a tempting prospect for members of Al Qaeda. If the nuclear industry tries to tell you terrorists would never get at the materials, it should be reminded of its failed mock-attack program. Before 9/11, close to 50% of all nuclear power plants that underwent mock terrorist attacks failed. These tests involved just four guys attacking on foot. The plant had six months to prepare for the attack and knew which night the "attackers" were coming. The tests were conducted by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC.)

After 9/11 the NRC said it tightened up the tests. The only thing they tightened up was public access to the results, which are now kept secret.

What we do know is that the tests are not up to the level of the actual 9/11 attacks – 19 guys in 4 teams – nor do they cover attacks from the air. Nine states attorneys general have already demanded that nuclear plants at least be able to meet the 9/11 standard. But a June 20, 2005 *Time Magazine* cover story - "Are These Towers Safe?" - revealed that the number of attackers in the new NRC mock tests "is less than double the old figure and a fraction of the size of the 9/11 group." You do the math. We also know that the contract for conducting the tests was awarded to Wackenhut, the same company that guards approximately 50% of the reactor sites.

Feel any safer yet?

Now let's talk about the 32 reactors around the country whose irradiated fuel pools sit on the top floor of the reactor building outside of containment. As one cynical colleague quipped, you may as well paint a target symbol on the roof. The National Academy of Sciences concluded in an April 6, 2005 report that the pools are highly vulnerable to catastrophic fire. At the same time, the NRC chairman, Nils Diaz, publicly insisted such a fire could be put out with a hose. We'll remember to call him – and ask him to bring his garden hose – if the worst happens and such an inferno occurs.

This would all be laughable if it didn't border on criminal irresponsibility. (Once in a

while it does actually get laughable, such as the recent nuclear industry attempt to convince Vermonters they could safely evacuate by sending in representatives dressed as kangaroos and riding on tricycles. If you can figure out the message here, let me know.)

And then there's climate change. Ask the Bush administration, and it's not happening. Ask the nuclear industry and it's a crisis that can only be answered with the biggest nuclear dollar grab in history - $13 billion and counting so far of our money is in the federal budget request for more U.S. nuclear power.

Nuclear power makes no sense at all on this one. It takes up to 10 years for a new reactor to go from breaking ground to generating electricity. On the way, tons of carbon dioxide is still released into the atmosphere during transportation, uranium enrichment and power plant construction. Then there's the cost – at least $3-$4 billion per reactor. We'd need to build a reactor every two weeks for the next 50 years worldwide to make any meaningful impact on climate change. The planet can't wait and we can't afford that kind of illusory fix. We can bring wind power on faster, more cheaply and safely. We can reduce demand through efficiency.

And then of course there's the highly radioactive waste, toxic for hundreds and thousands of years and with no place to go. When you put all this together, a nuclear power program doesn't even sound intelligent let alone rational. But of course it's not about intelligence. It's about money. Our money.

The United States was founded on a pioneering spirit that has evolved into global technological leadership. But our wagons are getting stuck in the sand. Meanwhile other countries – especially in Europe – are doing extraordinary things with wind power and energy conservation. The U.S. could lead the world in alternative energy innovations that don't emit cancer-causing radiation or create opportunities for theft of nuclear bomb-making materials. Instead, we are digging for dinosaur fossils while "old" Europe leaves us behind in a cloud of our own radiological dust.