



# **NUCLEAR INFORMATION AND RESOURCE SERVICE**

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## **STATEMENT OF MICHAEL MARIOTTE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, TO NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION PETITION REVIEW BOARD, OCTOBER 7, 2011**

### **ON BEYOND NUCLEAR PETITION TO CLOSE GE MARK I REACTORS**

I am Michael Mariotte, executive director of Nuclear Information and Resource Service. We are the information and networking center for people concerned about nuclear power. We work with hundreds of organizations and tens of thousands of people across the United States, and tens of thousands more across the world.

Thank you for holding this meeting.

You have heard from the petition's sponsors, and we support them. You have heard from the engineers, and we support them. You have heard from citizens who have been working on reactors that impact their communities, and we support them.

I guess it's my job to try to bring to you the perspective of the public on this issue—a perspective that has broadened and deepened since March 11.

Quite frankly, the public doesn't understand you. They don't really understand why a petition like this is even an issue of discussion.

I saw a poll recently that indicated 95% of the people in the world know about Fukushima. 95%! It takes an extraordinary event for 95% of the people in the world to know about it—yet they know about Fukushima. They saw GE Mark I reactors explode there and release toxic radiation across the world—and they know that is not a good thing and that something has to be done to make sure that never happens again.

What most of those 95% don't know, yet, is that you, this agency, knew 40 years ago that this is exactly what would happen if a Mark I reactor were challenged. Your predecessor agency, the Atomic Energy Commission, was told by your own safety officials that the Mark I reactors were deficient, and shouldn't be allowed to operate. That plea was denied by the top official at the AEC, not because the Mark I's were safe, but because banning them "could well be the end of nuclear power."

And so the U.S. AEC, and then NRC, began its policy of relying on luck as the fundamental protection for the public from the Mark I's—a hope that nothing would happen that would challenge them.

This agency was reminded in 1986 by your own top safety official about what would happen if a Mark I were challenged—it would explode, with a 90% probability of containment failure.

Rather than close these reactors to protect the public from their deficient design, this agency chose the band-aid approach. And so we saw the installation of containment venting systems, with the theory being, well, since these reactors will explode and cause a catastrophe if they're challenged, if we vent them first and release some of the hydrogen gas—and some of the radiation—maybe they won't explode and release all of their radiation. Rather than address the fundamental design deficiencies, the NRC decided to try to compensate for them. It was like putting a band-aid on a broken leg. It didn't help much, but at least it was doing something, but the primary defense was still dumb luck.

Of course, as we saw at Fukushima, the luck ran out. The containment venting system didn't work. Turns out it needed power, and there wasn't any.

And so these GE Mark I reactors did exactly what was predicted 40 years earlier. They exploded, their containments failed, and enormous amounts of radiation were released.

But instead of learning the lesson and closing these deficient reactors, the NRC staff is now proposing to make the venting systems a little better. You're compensating for the failure of the compensation you've already made for the design deficiencies. The band-aid you put on 25 years ago is fraying, so you're proposing to put another band-aid on over it and crossing your fingers for continued luck in the U.S.—luck that already ran out in Japan.

What we don't understand, what the public doesn't understand, is why you don't just close them. The Mark I reactors account for less than 4% of the U.S. electricity supply. There is plenty of reserve power on hand to cover that. If they all closed tomorrow, in terms of electricity availability, no one would ever notice.

That would seem to be the prudent thing to do if the goal is to protect the public health and safety. Relying on band-aids and luck has proven insufficient.

But the Mark I's of course, are mostly older—and paid for. And for the utilities that own them, well, they surely generate a lot more than 4% of their profits. That's a powerful incentive to keep them running, regardless of the risk to the public. After all, in the U.S. our luck has held out for 40 years now...

We're tired of that kind of thinking. No, we're fed up with that kind of thinking. It's too familiar: large corporations, with facilitation from government agencies, putting profits above our economic interests, above our environmental interests, above our health and safety.

That's the same reasons why ever-growing numbers of people are occupying Wall Street, and why that movement is spreading to city after city. We're fed up with the concept that the interests of large corporations constantly are placed above those of the American people.

This isn't a normal matter of regulatory dispute between the NRC and some public interest groups—we all know that happens frequently, and we all know our roles in trying to resolve such disputes.

No, this issue goes far beyond that. This is a matter of life and death. This is about our very lives and those of our children and grandchildren. This is about the very existence of our homes and communities.

There are at least 80,000 people in Japan who already have lost their homes and their communities and their livelihoods. We are already seeing health effects, and we will be seeing more in the years to come, especially among the children. And we don't want to see that happen here.

No one knows what the next challenge to one of these reactors will be. It probably won't be an earthquake/tsunami combination. Maybe it will be a hurricane, or a large solar flare, or operator error, or a broken pipe, or something we don't foresee at all.

But we do know, as you have known for 40 years, what will happen when that challenge comes: the reactor will fail, and more communities will be lost and more lives destroyed.

And that will be on your hands. Because you have the power to change that, you have the power to close down these reactors and stop with the band-aids and stop relying on pure dumb luck as a protective measure.

Or would you prefer that we expand the Occupy movement from Wall Street and Washington to Oyster Creek and Vermont Yankee and Dresden and the rest, and just go in there and turn these reactors off ourselves?

To be honest, we would rather that our government do the right thing and act on behalf of the public for a change.