

Nuclear plant security is under the gun

Greg Gordon

Star Tribune Washington Bureau Correspondent
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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Kevin Augustin spent 21 years patrolling Xcel Energy's Prairie Island nuclear power plant but grew haggard from working extensive overtime in the year after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Last September, after working 12-hour shifts for seven days and getting little sleep during an abbreviated day off, Augustin said, he dragged himself to another shift.

Hours later he was accused of dozing on the job, and he was soon fired.

Augustin, who was president of the plant's security officers union, suspects he was dismissed because he complained to Nuclear Regulatory Commission inspectors and a government watchdog that guards were groggy from working 60-and 72-hour weeks.

Prairie Island's security managers say they didn't learn until after Augustin was fired that he had talked to the Project on Government Oversight.

The group's report last fall on the thinly stretched security forces at some of the nation's 65 operating nuclear power plants prompted the NRC late last month to issue an order generally limiting guards to 48-hour workweeks.



Former Prairie Island guard

Marlin Levison
Star Tribune

Such flying sparks are emblematic of the heated debate surrounding the protection of nuclear plants, a pressing priority since drawings of some of the 103 reactors they house were found in Al-Qaida terrorist hideouts. Critics say that the plants have too few guards and that the guards are overworked and lack the training and weaponry to withstand a large terrorist attack.

But NRC spokeswoman Sue Gagner calls the plants "among the most hardened facilities in the United States," all but dismissing the possibility that terrorists could cause a nuclear meltdown that results in significant radiation release.

The extent to which the plants are guarded was enough of a concern to U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge that, before the war with Iraq, he asked governors to temporarily post National Guard troops outside them.

Besides adopting the fatigue order, the NRC last month issued two others. They increased the guards' training requirements and required them to be able to withstand a bigger attack than the three-or four-member force envisioned in previous drills. The commission said the changes should assure the public that nuclear plants "are well-secured against potential threats."

The utilities, which lobbied against the new directives, were given six months to comply with the fatigue order and 18 months to meet the other requirements.

The NRC already had put in place a series of post-Sept. 11 security enhancements. Earlier orders boosted the number of guards from 5,000 to 7,000, required more external barriers to thwart truck bombers and directed security officers to carry semiautomatic rifles.

Minnesota's new public safety commissioner, Rich Stanek, said he is confident that the state's two nuclear plants -- the twin-reactor, 1,060-megawatt Prairie Island plant near Red Wing and the 553-megawatt Monticello plant -- "are secure, very secure." Stanek, a former Minneapolis police detective, said the security officers "get better training than the Minneapolis cops or state troopers get."

Mark Findlay, security manager for Nuclear Management Co., which is based in Hudson, Wis., and operates both plants, said: "I challenge you to find any other industrial facility that has the quality of security officers, the quality of security processes and the robust physical structures that we have at Monticello and Prairie Island."

Such boasts draw hoots from Peter Stockton, a former special assistant to Energy Secretary Bill Richardson during the Clinton administration. Stockton conducted much of the investigation by the Project on Government Oversight (POGO).

"The plants are outrageously vulnerable," Stockton said.

Last fall, after interviewing Augustin and more than 20 other guards at 13 nuclear plants, POGO jolted the industry with a report concluding that security forces at most plants are "undermanned, undertrained, underequipped, underpaid and unsure about the rules of using deadly force."

Stockton said POGO has since interviewed about 130 more security officers, who reinforced the findings.

POGO Executive Director Danielle Brian said the orders might force plants to hire more officers. But, she said: "These facilities are not safe. The industry is currently unwilling to spend the money it would take to make them safe, and the government hasn't been willing to fill in the gap."

Mock attacks

POGO says the plants' vulnerability was underscored when, in 37 of 81 NRC drills before Sept. 11, security officers failed to ward off a band of three mock terrorists with inside knowledge of the plant. Stockton said an attack by a large, well-organized and well-armed group of terrorists would probably overwhelm the security at most plants in minutes. Members of an Army special operations unit at Fort Bragg, N.C., who posed as terrorists in pre-Sept. 11 drills were unimpressed by the guards' defenses, he said.

"If indeed there is a real terrorist attack, with surprise, speed and violence of action," Stockton said, "in 80 percent of these facilities the guards are either going to run or hide."

NRC Commissioner Ed McGaffigan credits POGO with prodding the agency to issue the order limiting security guards to 48-hour weeks unless they desire to and are fit to work more hours.

McGaffigan said NRC inspectors had learned of serious overtime problems at about 20 plants but didn't pass on the complaints because there were no alleged violations of NRC rules limiting guards to 72-hour weeks.

"What the guards were really telling us is, we needed to change our rules," he said.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, the NRC has stopped testing the plants' abilities to combat mock terrorist attacks until they are ready to respond to a secret new standard.

The plants still conduct their own drills, but some of their exercises have drawn ridicule. Foster Zeh, a former security supervisor at New York's Indian Point nuclear plant, said guards were reduced to playing childlike games using rubber guns and shouting, "Bang" and "I got you first!"

Findlay said Prairie Island officers fire small paint balls in their drills so they can tell whether they hit their targets.

Findlay, a former Secret Service agent, said the guards at Prairie Island, Monticello and four other Upper Midwest plants that Nuclear Management Co. operates receive eight to 10 weeks of rigorous training, as well as quarterly training that includes 19 1/2 hours per year on the firing range. Findlay said the security officers, who work for Wackenhut Nuclear Services, are paid \$28,000 to \$32,000 annually plus overtime and are "highly motivated."

Augustin said he told POGO that he feels security contingents at Prairie Island might be able to hold off a small group of terrorists but would probably lose to a large one.

NRC and industry officials stress that even if terrorists got inside a nuclear plant, it would be hard to cause a sizeable radiation release because reactors and cooling pools that hold spent reactor fuel are shielded by walls of reinforced concrete several feet thick.

But a soon-to-be-published study by a team of Princeton University researchers found that a successful attack on a spent fuel pool could cause a "significantly worse" radiation release than the 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Ukraine. That accident has been blamed for killing 31 people and exposing hundreds of thousands more to radiation.

Working overtime

Nuclear Management spokeswoman Maureen Brown said average weekly overtime at Prairie Island since the Sept. 11 attacks ranged mostly from 10 to 19 hours, peaking at 25.4 hours last September and dipping to 6.4 hours last month after a class of new guards was hired. Many employees have volunteered for overtime to fatten their paychecks, she said.

Augustin said that before he was accused of falling asleep during a shift, he told a couple of fellow security officers that he had spoken with POGO. He said he did not know whether they told managers.

Findlay said that Wackenhut asked a retired FBI agent to conduct an investigation to determine whether his dismissal was fair. He said none of the 16 employees interviewed, from top Wackenhut managers to security guards, knew at the time of Augustin's firing that he had spoken with POGO.

Some security officers caught napping have been suspended, rather than fired, but Findlay contended that Augustin's behavior went over the line.

"This individual went and what I would call, made a bed for himself out of the view of the management or his peers . . . so he could sleep," he said.

Brown and Findlay said Augustin failed to respond to radio calls for half an hour before an officer awakened him.

Augustin said he doesn't know whether he was sleeping in his car. But he said he was so weary -- after working 84 hours in seven days on the night shift that ends at 6 a.m. and getting little sleep during a short day off because he met with a manager to discuss the work schedule -- that he almost begged off reporting for his new day shift starting at 6 a.m. He said he did not want to force an exhausted colleague to come in on his day off and thought he could make it through the shift, so he reported himself "fit for duty."

NRC Commissioner McGaffigan, who has heard from both sides in the dispute, said he was disturbed by Augustin's work schedule.

"I don't like people working 72-hour weeks . . . with only one day off between," shifting from nights to days, he said. "You should have two days off. That's what all of the studies say."

Doug Hartnett, a lawyer for the Government Accountability Project, said the group has handled a number of cases where "exactly the same thing happened" to guards who complained about nuclear plant conditions.

He said the Accountability Project, which seeks to protect whistle-blowers, is considering providing Augustin with legal representation.

Greg Gordon is at ggordon@mcclatchydc.com.