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Blackout Demonstrates Vulnerability of Nuclear Plants and Failure of Electricity Deregulation

The August electricity blackout, which shut down 21 nuclear reactors in the United States and Canada, was a spectacular demonstration of the heightened vulnerability of nuclear power plants in a deregulated electricity market. Nonetheless, leaders in Congress are disingenuously exploiting the blackout to promote more reliance on nuclear power and further electricity deregulation. Consider:

- When a plant loses offsite electrical supply, it automatically shuts down. It must then connect to a generator to keep coolant circulating and prevent the reactor core from overheating and causing a meltdown. However, in only the past 12 months, there have been 15 reported cases in which nuclear plants' emergency diesel generators were declared inoperable. In four cases, all emergency diesel generators were inoperable at once.
- The large pools where "spent" nuclear fuel is stored at nuclear sites, which circulate cool water to keep the fuel cool, are **not** connected to backup generators. This material is both highly radioactive and very hot; if the power is out for too long (as little as eight hours), this material may catch fire and contaminate huge areas.
- In case of an emergency, many sirens in place to alert officials and the public may not operate because of a lack of power. In reports submitted to the NRC after the blackout, the Indian Point and Ginna nuclear stations (both in New York) noted that many of their emergency sirens malfunctioned. In the case of Indian Point, the sirens in four surrounding counties—including the densely populated Westchester County, with nearly 1 million people—failed during the blackout. If that were to happen in the event of a meltdown, the region would be left in a tragic state of ignorance.
- Local emergency personnel, who would be risking their lives in the event of an accident or attack, are not confident that they would be able to handle the overwhelming problems that would come with a disaster. In May 2003, 175 Indian Point-area first responders signed a petition to the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission expressing their concerns that "even [their] best efforts may not be enough to adequately protect the public health and safety of the citizens of this region."

The House-Senate energy conference committee is currently considering energy legislation (H.R. 6) that piles on subsidies for nuclear power, including incentives for research and development and tax breaks for nuclear operators. Both bills also authorize the U.S. Department of Energy's *Nuclear Power 2010* program to promote the construction of new nuclear reactors and the *Generation IV* program to develop new reactor designs. Further, both bills reauthorize the Price-Anderson Act to extend federal insurance protection to potential new reactors.

Congress should reject H.R. 6 and support a bill that addresses reliability issues separate from the omnibus energy bill.

See the full report, *The Big Blackout and Amnesia in Congress: Lawmakers Turn a Blind Eye to the Danger of Nuclear Power and the Failure of Deregulation*, at www.citizen.org/documents/bigblackout.pdf.