# The Nuclear Genie

## Despite Risks, Economic Flaws, Industry Still Pushing Nuclear Energy

*By Wenonah Hauter*

For the past 30 years, Public Citizen has worked with grassroots activists to create a sustainable, nuclear-free energy future. While the anti-nuclear movement has been successful in crippling the industry, our work is far from over. The industry is fighting for survival, and its proponents hope for a renaissance as the government lowers safety standards and establishes a publicly owned dump to take possession of the industry's deadly radioactive waste.

In 1974, when Ralph Nader organized the Critical Mass anti-nuclear conference in Washington, D.C., attended by more than 1,000 activists, the nuclear industry was in its heyday. Many believed that its technology would power our future. But just five years later, the worst nuclear accident in U.S. history, at Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island, created a tectonic shift in the American public's view of the industry, engendering deep suspicion of the technology. Even before Three Mile Island, the industry's prospects were waning. Twenty reactor projects had already been canceled. In fact, to date, no new reactors have been ordered and subsequently completed in the United States since 1973. The last one to be completed — Watts Barr in 1996 — took 23 years to finish, at a cost of more than $7 billion.

Despite the economic shortcomings and the risks of catastrophic failures, the nuclear industry continues to operate more than 100 plants in the United States and is building dozens of new plants overseas.

At the time, the 1974 conference, which inspired the creation of Public Citizen's Critical Mass Energy Project, provided a national focal point for the scattered local activists who were challenging the nuclear industry in dozens of communities. Citizens attending the conference heard the shocking news that Karen Silkwood, a whistleblower from a plutonium fuel fabrication plant in Oklahoma, had been killed in a car crash as she drove to meet a union official and a reporter from *The New York Times* to share evidence about the hazardous working conditions at the Kerr-McGee plant.

Silkwood's death galvanized the anti-nuclear movement into action, resulting in strong grassroots opposition to nuclear power and the siting of nuclear waste dumps. Citizen activism prevented electric utilities from building many of the plants they envisioned. In all, 93 reactors have been canceled over the past three decades. Opponents stopped the industry and its allies in government from building nuclear waste dumps around the country to "dispose" (although no safe method of disposing of waste exists) of low-level nuclear waste. And so far, unified action has prevented the government from establishing a dump for high-level waste in an inappropriate location at Yucca Mountain, Nev., although that debate is still raging and the nuclear industry has spent a fortune in campaign contributions to win the votes of members of Congress.

Now the industry is attempting to extend the licenses of its aging nuclear plants 20 years beyond the initial 40 years that the reactors were expected to operate. At the same time, because the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) wants to help the industry be cost-competitive in a newly deregulated electricity market, the agency is drastically lowering the bar for safety. Under the guise of efficiency, the agency is conducting "risk analyses" that have the effect of reducing regulation and exposing the public to more risk from nuclear accidents.

Meanwhile, pro-nuclear forces in the government are

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working to create a new standard for how much radiation people can be exposed to in their daily lives. And pro-nuclear scientists are working overtime to persuade policymakers that low-level radiation is not as dangerous as once thought. The goal of these efforts is to help the nuclear industry foist its nuclear trash onto the public and enable the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) to get rid of the waste from the production of nuclear bombs.

While in 2000 we were successful in pushing DOE to temporarily suspend the release of radioactive metals for recycling into household products, the NRC is proceeding toward setting a standard that will make it easier to reuse contaminated metals and soil. If we fail to stop the NRC in this standard-setting process, we could see the widespread release of radioactivity into the public domain. We could see radioactive materials from bomb-making plants being recycled into household goods and so-called "low-level" waste being dumped into landfills, where it could contaminate drinking water. We are already seeing radioactive waste being used to "irradiate" food supplies, a process that raises a host of troubling questions. Beyond our goal of prohibiting reuse, a key issue is whether any of the food products will be labeled to allow consumer choice.

The easing of regulatory constraints could make it cheaper and easier for electric utilities to dismantle defunct nuclear plants. For instance, in one irresponsible method of decommissioning called "rubblization" that is being proposed, the interior concrete surface of a nuclear plant is partially decontaminated, and the rest of the concrete, steel and other materials are crushed and dumped into the foundation hole. Then the rubble is covered with a soil cap. The result is the creation of a low-level radiation dump without any public input that would normally accompany a state or federal regulatory process.

Reducing the costs for decommissioning reactors and relaxing radiation standards are an important prerequisite for the industry's goal of reducing costs. But the industry's plans for the 21st century are much more ambitious, and as a result of globalization and the movement toward electric utility deregulation, they will be easier to pursue.

Beginning in the late 1970s, large industrial corporations joined right-wing ideologues in calling for deregulation of the electric industry. Large electricity users no longer wanted to pay the high rates that stemmed from the expensive mistake of nuclear power. Calls by large industries for utility deregulation found a ready chorus in academics, analysts and politicians who wanted to spout the "free market" ideology. At first, the electric utilities strenuously opposed attempts to end their highly profitable monopolies. Those with heavy nuclear debt worried that they would be unable to survive if their ratepay-

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# Nuking Food

## *Irradiation Raises Safety Concerns*

Public Citizen's expertise in nuclear issues has led to our recent work on an emerging health and environmental issue — food irradiation. We are engaged in a battle over what kind of food supply our children will have. Will our children and grandchildren have access to fresh, wholesome food? Not if large, multinational corporate interests have their way. The nuclear and agribusiness industries have teamed up to promote the use of irradiation, a technology that uses the equivalent of millions of chest X-rays to extend the shelf life of food and to kill bacteria.

Under the guise of protecting the public from food-borne illness, this harmful and unproven nuclear technology is being foisted upon the public to increase corporate profits. The meat industry, for example, wants to speed up slaughter lines — even if this results in contamination — and use irradiation to lower the incidence of meat contamination rather than increase inspections. Corporate interests also plan to use irradiation to produce food more cheaply. They hope to raise meat, fruits and vegetables in countries like Mexico, Chile, Brazil and China where they can pay workers pennies an hour, escape environmental regulation and use pesticides that may not be legal in the developed world. Irradiation plays a significant role in this plan because it triples shelf life and kills insects and bacteria, which means food can be transported longer distances.

Unfortunately, irradiation has been legalized by a flawed process at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Irradiation initiates a complex sequence of reactions in food that literally rips apart its molecular structure. It destroys vitamins and enzymes and creates potentially harmful chemical combinations. The FDA has legalized radiation of fruit, vegetables, beef, pork, lamb, eggs and spices.

It is only through the vigilance of citizens that the tide can be turned. Pro-irradiation forces are pushing for the repeal of already-weak labeling that is mandated for irradiated food. Consumers must demand that their elected members of Congress maintain and strengthen labeling. At the same time, in the few states where irradiated food is being sold, consumers must clearly say no. The future of our food supply is at stake.

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ers were free to purchase electricity from other providers.

But, because electric utilities are so powerful in their state legislatures, they quickly learned they could achieve huge ratepayer bailouts in exchange for rewriting the rules about how electricity is sold. So far, 24 states have passed deregulation laws. Using huge lobbying staffs and large campaign contributions, nuclear utilities were able to persuade state legislatures to palm off the exorbitant price tag for nuclear power on ratepayers. The bailout of utilities nationwide could cost ratepayers more than $200 billion, making it one of the biggest corporate bailouts in history.

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And one need only look west to see that deregulation is a failed plan. The electricity crisis in California can be blamed squarely on deregulation. Ratepayers in San Diego have been paying rates as much as three times as high as the previous year. Ratepayers in other California cities may have to pay an extra $6 billion (and climbing) in rates to bail out their utilities, which have been forced to pay outrageous prices for wholesale electricity. Meanwhile California has resorted to rolling blackouts to keep the whole state from going dark.

When deregulation was sold to Californians in 1996, the rates consumers paid for electricity were frozen at 1996 levels until 2002. Utilities, which supported the rate freeze when they helped draft the law, now seek to end it because the price they are paying to buy power from out-of state suppliers far exceeds the rate cap they are allowed to charge consumers.

Unless investor-owned power companies are regulated, they will always take advantage of consumers. Regulation is needed to keep power suppliers from charging the highest prices they can. Regulation is also needed to make sure the utilities build enough power plants to meet the demands of customers for the foreseeable future.

As Public Citizen predicted, not one state has restructured its electric industry in a way to benefit consumers or protect our natural environment. Instead, the nuclear industry has gotten a boost. Deregulation and globalization have accelerated the consolidation of the industry as companies merge to create giant multinational corporations. This trend could have grave implications for the future of nuclear technology.

Unfortunately, as the nuclear industry becomes more international and consolidated, it is likely to become even less accountable. The only way that we can hope to defeat the nuclear industry and protect the public is to organize citizens to demand that safety comes first and that people come before profits. Public Citizen takes very seriously the challenge to stop the actions of the pro-nuclear forces and alert the public about its opportunity to participate in the decisions that will affect the future of generations to come. |PC|