

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission responds

Facing South contacted the Nuclear Regulatory Commission about the new findings contained in our investigation into the Three Mile Island incident in 1979 and its aftermath. Diane Screnci, Senior Public Affairs Officer for the NRC, provided this response via email:

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The details on the TMI accident were investigated following the accident by both the NRC and an independent commission appointed by the President. The Kemeny Commission published a multi-volume report. President Carter appointed the 12 members to the Commission, selecting those who were neither strongly pro- nor anti- nuclear.

First, there was no explosion. Further, the Kemeny Commission report states, that even if the accident had melted the core, the containment would not have been breached.

Regarding the radiation releases, helicopters hired by TMI's owner, General Public Utilities Nuclear, and the Department of Energy were sampling radioactivity in the atmosphere above the plant by midday. A team from the Brookhaven National Laboratory was also sent to assist in radiation monitoring. That monitoring continued for some time.

Detailed studies of the radiological consequences of the accident have been conducted by the NRC, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (now Health and Human Services), the Department of Energy, and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Several independent studies have also been conducted. Estimates are that the average dose to about 2 million people in the area was only about 1 millirem. To put this into context, exposure from a chest x-ray is about 6 millirem. Compared to the natural radioactive background dose of about 100-125 millirem per year for the area, the collective dose to the community from the accident was very small. The maximum dose to a person at the site boundary would have been less than 100 millirem.

In the months following the accident, although questions were raised about possible adverse effects from radiation on human, animal, and plant life in the TMI area, none could be directly correlated to the accident. Thousands of environmental samples of air, water, milk, vegetation, soil, and foodstuffs were collected by various groups monitoring the area. Very low levels of radionuclides could be attributed to releases from the accident. However, comprehensive investigations and assessments by several well-respected organizations have concluded that in spite of serious damage to the reactor, most of the radiation was contained and that the actual release had negligible effects on the physical health of individuals or the environment.

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