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Why Americans Are Less Prepared and More at Risk than the People of Fukushima

By Abby Luby

If you're one of the 120 million Americans living within a 50 mile radius of a nuclear power plant, you'd better have your "[Go-Bag](#)" handy. But then again, if an evacuation is triggered, you may not be able to carry it very far.

Today, an [investigative report](#) by the Associated Press, part of their four-part headliner series on nuclear power, slammed the evacuation plans in place around the 104 nuclear reactors in the United States for neglecting to consider growing populations and aging infrastructure, and for relying on counterfactual assumptions.

The AP report cites the example of the densely populated area around the Indian Point nuclear plant in Westchester County, now a thriving New York City suburb. When the first of its three reactors was built in 1964, Northern Westchester was semi-rural and much more thinly populated. Today, it's a populous commuter zone of winding roads and bottlenecked bridge crossings that jam up at rush hour. About 270,000 residents live in a ten-mile radius around the plant the report found -- more than around other nuclear plant in the US, and many times the number that lived near Japan's Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant.

The meltdown there in March 2011 forced some 70,000-80,000 people living within 12 miles to evacuate. They got out successfully, but that's no indication evacuation would succeed here.

Surrounding populations in the US are often denser: Fukushima evacuated only about one quarter of the people that would have to be evacuated in a comparable emergency around Indian Point.

And the US falls far, far short of Japan's high standard of emergency preparedness. Because of its harrowing history of destructive earthquakes and tsunamis, Japan is considered one of the world's best prepared countries, mandating yearly evacuation drills for schoolchildren and more frequent drills throughout the country for the last 50 years. Not so here. We don't bother with actual evacuation drills, just theoretical, table-top ones, possibly because we don't want to prove how impractical our evacuation plans are.

For years, officials of counties surrounding the plant warned about the lack of realism of the Indian Point evacuation plan. There was some outcry about its vulnerability after the 9-11 attacks, but even that did little to change our culture of lax nuclear oversight and lack of emergency preparedness. Even as the 911 commission [revealed](#) that Al Qaeda had actively reconnoitered and considered attacking Indian Point, then Homeland Security czar Tom Ridge famously said plant security was the "prerogative" of the private plant owner.

The State Emergency Management Office (SEMO) requires all the Executives of all counties in the emergency zone around Indian Point to sign off on its evacuation plan, then it rubber-stamps the plan and sends it to FEMA. But in 2003 and 2004, under pressure from constituents after 9-11, county officials and SEMO refused to sign. That prompted New York Governor Pataki to commission a \$1 million evaluation of the plan from the consulting firm of former FEMA director James Lee Witt. [The Witt report](#) said what every resident already knew: evacuating people ten miles around Indian Point in a nuclear emergency was impossible. Pataki subsequently buried the report and ignored recommendations for catastrophic preparation.

After that, the Indian Point evacuation zone was quietly [reduced](#) from ten miles to TWO miles, plus an eight-mile wedge shape in the direction of the wind blowing the radioactive plume around (never mind what happens to the wedge if the wind shifts), on the self-serving theory that any radioactivity released in an American reactor accident would be small.

That's a flawed theory. Many nuclear plants around the US contain several times the radioactivity of Fukushima, a recent [study](#) finds, in addition to much denser surrounding populations. The fuel pools at Indian Point contain roughly three times the radioactivity of all the fuel pools in the entire six-reactor Fukushima complex combined.

In theory, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission stipulates that an unworkable and outdated evacuation plan is grounds for closing a nuclear power plant. But in practice, the NRC ignores that rule and annually approves the Indian Point plan over local objections.

Westchester County has become more aggressive about advising residents on DIY emergency preparations. They suggest having a waterproof Go-Bag at the ready, filled with about 28 items you can buy yourself, including potassium iodine tablets, medicines, baby supplies, clothing, hygiene items, money, identification papers, sleeping bags, radio, bottled water, and an emergency planning booklet. Headstrong survivor types can always purchase radiation suits, protective gear, Geiger counters or other consumer-type radiation detectors.

But that's no substitute for the NRC taking emergency planning and its mandate to protect public health and safety seriously. While private plant owners get billions in federal subsidies,

indemnities and loan guarantees, taxpayers remain without viable evacuation plans and are left on our own to prepare for a nuclear emergency we're told won't happen, because "the US is not Japan." Indeed, we're not in the same position as Japan--ours is worse. Our population density, radioactivity concentrations and cavalier attitude towards nuclear preparedness would make a similar accident here far more serious. And unlike Fukushima, American downwinders would not be able to get away from it.

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Author's Bio: Abby Luby is a freelance journalist who has covered the Indian Point nuclear power plant in New York for over eight years, and the author of the forthcoming ebook *A Nuclear Romance*, a novel about nuclear dangers in New York, . Her articles on Indian Point appear in *The New York Daily News*, *The Westchester Guardian*, *The North County News*. She also writes for *The Poughkeepsie Journal*, *The Stamford Advocate/Greenwich Time*. As a regular contributor to *Valley Table Magazine* and the Hearst publications *HealthyLiving*, *Living [at] Home* and *Roll Magazine*, she also writes about hard news, food, health articles and art. She teaches writing and literature at Marist College.

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