

Lab Scientists Allay Fears About U.S. Health Risks From Crisis in Japan

March 21 2011, by Dan Krotz

As the nuclear crisis unfolds in Japan, several Berkeley Lab scientists have spoken to media outlets to assuage concerns about radiation risks in the U.S. and the safety of nuclear power plants in earthquake-prone parts of the nation.

Tom McKone, a scientist in the Environmental Energy Technologies Division and an expert on radiation exposure, said there's no reason for people in the U.S. to fear radiation exposure from the crisis in Japan — we're simply too far away. "As far as the United States goes, we have a lot working in our favor: very large distances, some 5-6,000 miles is the pathway of the wind," he said in a March 15 video interview with a MarketWatch reporter.

He added that the effects of prolonged fear and anxiety pose a greater health risk than [radiation exposure](#). "What I am more concerned about in North America is the stress levels that we are creating for ourselves," McKone said.

McKone also said that there's no need to stockpile potassium iodide pills, which are flying off some store shelves according to news reports. In an interview on KTSF 26, a Bay Area Chinese language TV station, he said, "It's not going to help them because there is no iodine exposure that they need to block in California."

His calls for calmness were echoed by officials from the California Department of Public Health and the California Emergency

Management Agency in a March 15 statement. The officials said, “We want to emphasize that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have all stated that there is no risk expected to California or its residents as a result of the situation in Japan. We are actively monitoring the situation in Japan and are ready to take all steps necessary to protect Californians should risks develop.”

Per Peterson, a senior scientist with the Accelerator and Fusion Research Division, stressed that a similar accident is unlikely to occur in the U.S. In a March 16 Wall Street Journal article, he said that while the U.S. does have some nuclear plants in earthquake zones—as in the case of California—they are near “slip-strike” fault lines that lack the potential to cause very large tsunamis as the Japanese “thrust fault” has.

Peterson also said in the article that after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, the government required nuclear-plant owners to ensure that their facilities could accommodate portable diesel pumps to provide back-up water injection to the facilities.

KTSF 26 also interviewed Kai Vetter, a Nuclear Science Division scientist and head of the Applied Nuclear Physics program who develops radiation detectors. Vetter said that the two nuclear power plants on the California coast are of a different design than nuclear power plants in [Japan](#). In addition, after Sept. 11, 2001, they were upgraded so that the connection between the generator and the reactor is much more secure.

“The point is they are really safe already, and even with a natural disaster of that dimension, we should be safe here in the United States,” said Vetter.

Provided by Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory

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