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Trump has undermined the agency tasked with making sure America never has another nuclear meltdown

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The Three Mile Island nuclear power plant is seen at sunrise in Middletown, Pennsylvania, on

by 2027 in order to power Microsoft's nearby data centers. (Σημειώνεται στα πλαίσια/κεντρώ)

Comment



The federal regulatory agency tasked with keeping America's nuclear power plants safe and running smoothly is set to make huge cuts to the amount of time its staffers spend on safety and emergency inspections, opening the door to more self-policing from the industry.

As it embarks on a reorganization to fulfill executive orders from President Donald Trump, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is proposing to dramatically reduce its inspection hours for existing nuclear power plants, cutting back on the amount of time independent inspectors look for plants' security procedures, radiation protection for staff, maintenance and safety.

The NRC has been a crucial part of keeping America's nuclear energy operating for the past 40 years — and experts say its authority is only more necessary than ever as the Trump administration seeks to usher in a new golden age of nuclear energy. But Trump wants to streamline the agency, and staff cuts combined with executive orders are troubling signs that Trump is undoing the NRC's independence, experts said.

That is “an issue of national security,” according to former NRC commission chair Allison Macfarlane, now the director of the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs at the University of British Columbia.

Macfarlane pointed to Japan's Fukushima nuclear meltdown, a tragedy that culminated after years of collusion between the government and electric utility operating the plant — including “self-inspections” that overlooked safety problems. “If there is political influence on the regulator and the regulator doesn't regulate

Nuclear safety inspections could be reduced

Much of way nuclear power regulation operates in this country today can be traced to 1979 – the year the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Pennsylvania experienced a series of mechanical and emergency response failures that led to a partial meltdown in the plant’s Reactor 2.

The worst commercial nuclear accident in US history was contained and ultimately had only very minor health impacts on the surrounding area. But it forced the government to take a hard look at safety reforms to ensure no such accident would happen again.

Among the many new federal safety reforms was the creation of a separate enforcement office within the agency.



Workers from Three Mile Island nuclear plant stand outside the visitors center early on March 30, 1979. The plant's Reactor 2 suffered a partial meltdown after a series of malfunctions. (*Rusty Kennedy/AP*)

Today, NRC inspectors regularly visit nuclear power plants throughout the year to do a variety of safety checks. They are tasked with making sure a plant can withstand a severe weather event or the seismic shock of an earthquake, and ensuring the plant is not overworking the nuclear fuel that generates power.

Other duties include checking to make sure plant equipment is running correctly in case of an emergency – making sure valves close, water pumps are working, and electrical equipment can supply power. In addition, there are typically two onsite resident inspectors from the NRC at each nuclear power plant (onsite inspectors would not be impacted by the NRC's proposed cutbacks, according to officials).

The US nuclear industry has a strong safety track record and its own internal safety group, but NRC's federal inspectors continue to play an important role in checking the operations and safety of America's aging nuclear power plants — the average age of which **is about 42 years old**.

“We have found stuff the plants did not find,” an NRC staffer told CNN, describing some catches as “significant safety findings.”

“No one's going to catch everything, and we're there as the independent oversight, auditing and quality check,” the staffer added.

The new changes NRC officials are proposing in order to meet Trump administration goals would cut the total number of annual NRC inspection hours back by 40%, according to an internal document viewed by CNN. Emergency preparedness inspection hours are being recommended to be cut back the most —

are being proposed to be cut back by 50%, security procedure inspection hours cut back by 48%, and nuclear reactor safety inspection procedure hours cut by 30%.

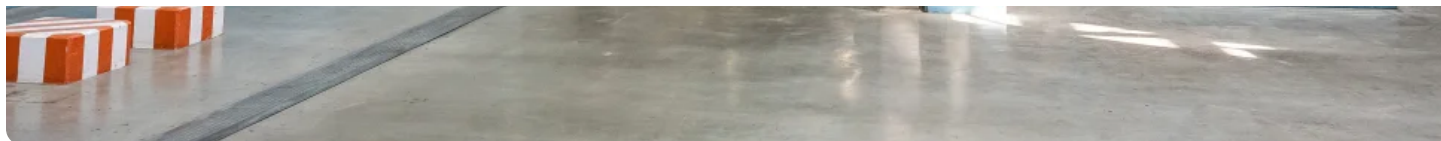
The proposed changes must be approved by five NRC commissioners to be finalized. If ultimately approved, the move could lead to fewer NRC inspectors on the job, the NRC staffer said.

But some agency officials don't think the changes will have an impact.

In an internal video to staff, NRC official Jeremy Groom called it "the most significant changes we've seen in the last 25 years" but defended the move, saying the inspections "don't yield a lot of safety benefit."

"We spend a lot of time on security, we spend a lot of time on radiation protection, we spend a lot of time on emergency preparedness, and those programs are fairly mature and they don't yield a lot of findings ... because licensees largely have taken control of those and have good operational practices in place," said Groom, the acting director of the NRC's Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation.





A person walks by a turbine generator unit inside the Pacific Gas and Electric Co. Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant in Avila Beach, California, in 2025. *(David Paul Morris/Bloomberg/Getty Images)*

That sentiment was echoed by NRC spokesperson Scott Burnell, who noted the agency is a “performance-based regulator” whose proposed changes are “based on extensive evidence.”

“Since 2018, annual inspections have averaged more than 1,900 hours, while the safety and security performance has steadily increased and these proposals reflect that,” Burnell said, adding inspection hours can be adjusted in the future “based on safety performance.” Burnell also noted the proposal is still under consideration by commissioners.

Former NRC commissioner Stephen Burns said such changes have long been debated within the agency. But Burns said any pullback on inspections would have to be done carefully.

“It’s not that the reduction itself is evil, but you have to be careful, and you need to evaluate, have we done the right thing?” he said.

The NRC staffer said they did not think the pull-back in inspections would lead to another major nuclear accident in the US, due to the industry’s strong focus on safety. But it could lead to things being missed and overlooked, as well as more staff leaving, they said. The staffer cited fears that the NRC’s workforce is shrinking as the industry goes through a period of expansion.

“I like to think that we’ll never get to another Three Mile Island situation. I like to

get there, the NRC staffer said. But there's always threats, there's always hurricanes coming that (could) knock off offsite power to a plant.”

A loss of independence

Nuclear power has a long history in the US; most plants are decades-old, and the atomic energy it uses generates about 20% of US electricity.

But there is new demand for nuclear power because of the aggressive rise of artificial intelligence, and the huge amount of electricity it needs to run. With the flip of a switch, a nuclear plant runs 24/7, the main reason why utilities and big tech companies favor it.

As power demand from AI data centers spikes in the US, Trump is trying to usher in a nuclear revival. Trump has set aggressive goals for nuclear energy — aiming to increase US nuclear power capacity to 400 gigawatts by 2050, about four times what it currently is.

The US is aiming to do that by maintaining its current fleet of around 95 nuclear power plants, bringing a small number of dormant plants online (including Three Mile Island's undamaged reactor, as well as previously shut-down power plants in Michigan and Iowa), and investing in new next-generation nuclear projects.



President Donald Trump signs an executive order regarding the Nuclear Regulatory Commission in the Oval Office of the White House in May 2025. *(Win McNamee/Getty Images)*

At the start of his term, Trump signed an executive order calling for dramatic changes within the NRC to speed up the process for licensing nuclear reactor construction and issuing licenses to operate. Some of those changes have included bringing the previously autonomous agency under the White House Office of Management and Budget, who can now review and approve reactor safety rules – a departure from past years.

At the same time, the agency lost staff members during a wave of early retirements spurred by DOGE at the start of Trump’s term.

Trump’s executive orders “have essentially broken the independence of the NRC,” said Edwin Lyman, the director of Nuclear Power Safety at the Union of Concerned

its authority to industry.

Burnell, the NRC spokesperson, did not comment about these concerns when asked by CNN.

The lack of an independent regulator — or even public perception that a nuclear regulator isn't independent — can be tremendously damaging, said Macfarlane, the former NRC commission chair.

In the case of Japan's Fukushima nuclear disaster, spurred by a major earthquake and tsunami, court rulings later blamed a culture of collusion between Japan's government and power company operating the plant. Faced with independent inspectors finding safety problems at the plant, the government regulators effectively allowed Fukushima to police itself, leading to several major issues that came to a head when the plant was overwhelmed by an earthquake and tsunami in 2011.

“That tells me that it's really important to have an independent regulator, and the US doesn't have one now,” Macfarlane said.



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