

Letters to the Editor: No, San Onofre isn't another Chernobyl waiting to happen



Surfers wade in front of the closed San Onofre nuclear power plant in north San Diego County. (Gregory Bull / Associated Press)

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To the editor: Attempting to construct a narrative that compares accidents at operating nuclear reactors to decommissioning plants like the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station (SONGS) may grab headlines, but is not reality. Even the writer of the HBO Chernobyl miniseries responded on Twitter to the op-ed article: “It is not Chernobyl. At all.”

The author, Dr. Kate Brown, implies that SONGS spent fuel storage creates a danger to the public, but never says what the risk to the public is. The answer is astonishingly low.

Unlike an operating reactor, a spent fuel canister (by design) cannot sustain a nuclear reaction needed to generate enough heat to initiate a Chernobyl- or Fukushima-like event.

At SONGS, spent nuclear fuel in dry storage is safely inside robust stainless steel canisters placed in an air-cooled, massive concrete monolithic structure. As for “leaks,” the spent fuel inside the canisters is a solid ceramic pellet contained inside a zirconium alloy fuel rod that is welded shut. There is no liquid in the canisters, only inert helium. The seismic rating for the system is twice that of the plant and it is constructed to be submerged under 50 feet of water and still function safely.

Southern California Edison is working to find long-term storage solutions that would see the spent nuclear fuel at SONGS moved off-site as soon as is reasonable. If folks such as Brown feel the same way, we welcome her help.

A permanent federal repository has been “waiting to happen” for decades. That’s where our collective focus should be.

Doug Bauder, San Clemente

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