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Nuclear power in a warming world - Assessing the risks, addressing the challenges

Union of Concerned Scientists - Lisbeth Gronlund, David Lochbaum, Edwin Lyman

Global warming demands a profound transformation in the ways we generate and consume energy. Because nuclear power results in few global warming emissions, an increase in nuclear power could help reduce global warming—but it could also increase the threats to human safety and security. The risks include a massive release of radiation due to a power plant meltdown or terrorist attack, and the death of hundreds of thousands due to the detonation of a nuclear weapon made with materials obtained from a civilian nuclear power system. Minimizing these risks is simply pragmatic: nothing will affect the public acceptability of nuclear power as much as a serious nuclear accident, a terrorist strike on a reactor or spent fuel pool, or the terrorist detonation of a nuclear weapon made from stolen nuclear reactor materials. [...] The risks posed by climate change may turn out to be so grave that the United States and the world cannot afford to rule out nuclear power as a major contributor to addressing global warming. However, it may also turn out that nuclear power cannot be deployed worldwide on the scale needed to make a significant dent in emissions without resulting in unacceptably high safety and security risks.