

Nuclear watchdogs downplaying the risks

Tom Whipple, Science Editor

September 19 2016, 12:01am, The Times



Scientists said that the true cost of a new reactor at Hinkley Point may not have been correctly calculated SUZANNE PLUNKETT /REUTERS

The risks of nuclear power are being significantly underestimated because of systematic under-reporting of accidents by industry bodies with conflicts of interest, scientists have said.

The largest analysis of the risks of nuclear accidents has calculated that a Fukushima-magnitude event is “more probable than not” in the lifetimes of people born today.

The government gave assent last week to the construction of the £18 billion Hinkley Point C reactor, the biggest investment in nuclear power in a generation. However, scientists from the UK and Switzerland said that its true cost may not have been correctly calculated because of the underestimation of risks. They also called for greater transparency in the nuclear industry, saying their estimates were hampered by “flawed and woefully incomplete” data.

Much of this data is meant to be held by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which collates national reports of nuclear accidents and rates them for severity. However, the scientists wrote in the journal *Risk Analysis*, they do not publish a historical database of these, which they describe as “astonishing”. They also said there were doubts about the scale used, arguing it underplays the severity of large events. “Given that the IAEA has the dual objective of promoting and regulating the use of nuclear energy, one should not take the full objectivity of the data for granted,” they wrote.

The French regulator is known to report hundreds of events every year deemed “significant to nuclear safety”, yet few turn up on the IAEA public records. Only 216 safety events since 1950 were available for the most recent analysis, but more than half of those had to be gleaned from press reports and other public data rather than being provided by the industry itself.

Benjamin Sovacool, from the University of Sussex, said that the IAEA had a conflict of interest, dating back to the Cold War, for encouraging civil nuclear power. “It relates back to ‘Atoms for Peace’,” he said. “The goal was to show that the atom could be a force for good not just evil. Because of that the IAEA has a strong promotional arm.”

National agencies were hugely under-reporting accidents, some of them involving millions of pounds worth of damage. “In Japan incidents where people got killed only came up years later. China has a strong interest in exporting nuclear technology and in keeping secrets,” he said.

One consequence of under-reporting is that the true costs of plants such as Hinkley Point C cannot be calculated. The analysis, by Spencer Wheatley from ETH Zurich, found that more than a billion pounds should be budgeted each year for dealing with nuclear accidents globally.

Professor Thomas Rose, from University College London, who was not involved in the research, said that it showed more openness was essential. “The secretiveness around nuclear event data is a huge problem,” he said. “Especially when investments like Hinkley Point have to be discussed and decided. Because of the international treaties it is probably impossible to get the data from the IAEA.”

Professor Sovacool agreed. “The first and most basic thing we need is much more transparent data from the nuclear industry and regulators,” he said. “It’s a matter of the industry not reporting to national regulators, regulators not reporting to the IAEA, and the IAEA not reporting all.”

A spokeswoman for the IAEA said: “The IAEA neither regulates nor promotes the nuclear industry. Our job is to help countries that use nuclear power to do so safely, securely and sustainably.” The UK’s Office For Nuclear Regulation was approached for comment but did not respond.