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**Risk of “Spurious Actuations” at Nuclear Power Plants?  
FCC Will Get Right On It, Real Soon, Really . . .**

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Americans, jittery after September 11 and Hurricane Katrina, can now rest assured that crack troops from the FCC’s new Bureau of Homeland Security will tackle any issue threatening immediate, instantaneous catastrophic loss of life and property in no more than a couple of years. As columnist Dave Barry would say, we’re not making this up.

In December of 2004, a nuclear power plant applied to the FCC seeking authority to operate a 900 MHz mobile system (a walkie-talkie system) as part of its safety regime. The request was submitted in response to a series of orders from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission directing power plants nationwide to increase security and safety at nuclear power facilities. While the slow processing of applications is hardly a noteworthy occurrence, the potential side effects associated with the FCC’s slow action in this instance are illuminating. The nuclear power plant needed a license for a new walkie-talkie system because its current walkie-talkies had the potential for “spurious actuations” at nuclear reactors.

The Nuclear Regulatory Agency has warned power plants that several events “have caused concern in the NRC staff” about the use of walkie-talkies at plants. More specifically, operations at 451-456 MHz seem to be the most troublesome. The NRC high-lighted instances where walkie-talkie systems caused the shut down of cooling loops, spuriously activated a pressurizer, and tripped a differential relay. At Three Mile Island, the use of walkie-talkies triggered a false alarm warning of combustible gasses. The NRC surmises that solid state devices are picking up and amplifying walkie-talkie signals which then actuate the nuclear power equipment. Although this sounds suspiciously like the plot line for an episode of “The Simpsons” (imagine Homer playing around on a walkie-talkie that keeps turning the nuclear meltdown button on and off), it’s not.

In its application to the FCC, the nuclear power plant notified the agency of the potential problems with the old frequencies and the security upgrade ordered by the NRC. In response, the FCC sent the power plant a form letter. The plant responded to the FCC form letter immediately and the FCC replied with another form letter. Finally, unfazed even by the potential problems that “spurious actuations” at a nuclear power facility could cause, the FCC eventually approved the application after two years. The reactors’ struggle with the FCC paperwork reminds us of the observation once made by famed rocket scientist Werner von Braun: we can lick gravity, but sometimes the paperwork is overwhelming.

