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Nuclear Reactor Safety Using Seismic and Natural Disaster Protection: A Study

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Abstract

Nuclear energy has enormous power and is essential to the global effort to provide clean, sustainable electricity, but it also carries a huge responsibility: guaranteeing its complete safety. Nuclear energy is at a turning point. Nuclear power provides a potent, carbon-free answer as the globe struggles with climate change and the pressing need to decarbonize energy grids. However, public fear, primarily from past mishaps like Chornobyl and Fukushima, continues to cloud its wider implementation. A critical vulnerability was highlighted by these occurrences, especially Fukushima: the possibility that natural disasters could trigger catastrophic nuclear events. However, the field of nuclear safety has undergone a significant transformation as a result of the lessons learnt from these events. Resilience against seismic activity and a wide range of natural disasters is currently given exceptional importance in nuclear reactor design and operation procedures. To minimize human interaction and lower the chance of failure, next-generation reactors incorporate advanced safety technologies such as passive cooling systems, automatic shutdown mechanisms, and real-time monitoring utilizing digital tools. These developments greatly improve nuclear plants' capacity to react efficiently in an emergency. In order to restore public confidence and ensure a sustainable energy future, the objective is not just to reduce risk but also to design systems that can endure and recover from strong natural forces.

Keywords: Nuclear reactor, safety, seismic, natural disaster protection, nuclear energy, passive safety

INTRODUCTION

Nuclear energy is at a critical juncture. As the world grapples with climate change and the urgent need to decarbonize energy grids, nuclear power offers a powerful and carbon-free solution. However, its widespread adoption remains overshadowed by public apprehension, largely stemming from historical accidents such as Chornobyl and Fukushima. These incidents, particularly Fukushima, underscore a crucial vulnerability: the potential for natural disasters to cascade into severe nuclear events [1–3].

However, the lessons learnt from these tragedies have profoundly reshaped nuclear safety. Modern nuclear reactor designs and operational protocols now place unprecedented emphasis on resilience against seismic activity and a broad spectrum of natural hazards. The goal is not merely to mitigate risk but to engineer systems that can withstand and recover from extreme natural forces, thereby rebuilding public trust and securing a sustainable energy future.

The inherent power of nuclear fission requires an equally robust safety framework. Unlike other energy sources, the consequences of a severe nuclear accident are far-reaching, encompassing

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environmental contamination, population displacement, and severe economic disruption. Therefore, the design, construction, and operation of nuclear power plants (NPPs) are governed by the most stringent safety regulations worldwide [4, 5].

The focus on natural disaster protection is multifaceted and incorporates advanced engineering principles, site-specific assessments, and comprehensive emergency preparedness. Earthquakes pose a unique threat to nuclear facilities because of their unpredictable nature and potential for widespread damage. Consequently, seismic safety is a cornerstone of modern NPP designs.

Site Selection

The first line of defense is meticulous site selection. Geological surveys have been conducted over decades to identify areas with minimal seismic activity or a low probability of active faults. Even in seismically active regions, sites are chosen to avoid direct fault lines, and the geology is carefully analyzed for its stability.

Probabilistic Seismic Hazard Assessment

This sophisticated analysis uses historical seismic data, geological information, and fault models to predict the probability and intensity of future earthquakes at given sites. Designers then build facilities to withstand a "design basis earthquake (DBE)"—a highly improbable, yet plausible, maximum earthquake for that location. Beyond this, "beyond design basis events (BDBE)" are also considered, which are even more extreme scenarios.

Structural Integrity and Redundancy

- *Reinforced concrete and steel:* NPP structures, particularly containment buildings and safety-related systems, are built with massive amounts of high-strength steel-reinforced concrete designed to absorb and dissipate seismic energy.
- *Base isolation: For* ***so****me* newer designs, "base isolation" systems are employed. These involve placing the entire reactor building on flexible bearings (e.g., layers of steel and rubber) that decouple the structure from ground motion during an earthquake, thereby reducing the forces transmitted to the building.
- *Damping systems:* Viscous dampers or other energy-absorbing devices are integrated into structures to dissipate seismic energy.
- *Redundant and diverse systems:* Critical safety systems (e.g., cooling pumps, control rods, and emergency power) are not only independently housed but also built with redundancy (multiple backups) and diversity (using different operational principles to prevent common-cause failures).

Seismic Instrumentation

NPPs are equipped with extensive arrays of accelerometers and seismographs that continuously monitor the ground motion. In the event of an earthquake, these instruments provide real-time data, allowing operators to swiftly assess damage and initiate protective measures.

Although earthquakes are a primary concern, modern NPPs are also engineered to withstand a range of other natural threats.

Tsunamis and Floods

- *Elevated structures:* Key safety-related equipment, including emergency power generators and cooling pumps, is often housed in elevated or watertight compartments above the projected maximum flood and tsunami levels.
- *Seawalls and barriers:* Coastal plants are protected by robust multi-layered seawalls, breakwaters, and flood barriers designed to withstand the energy of large tsunamis and storm surges.
- *Passive cooling systems:* Next-generation reactors are increasingly incorporating passive safety

features that rely on natural forces (gravity, convection, and natural circulation) to cool the reactor core, even without external power or human intervention, which is an invaluable asset during prolonged power outages caused by floods or tsunamis.

Extreme Weather Events

- *High winds and tornadoes:* Reactor buildings and critical infrastructure are designed to resist extreme wind loads and the impact of flying debris associated with tornadoes and hurricanes.
- *Heavy snowfall and ice storms:* Structures are designed for heavy snow loads, and measures are in place to prevent ice accumulation from affecting power lines or equipment.
- *Lightning protection:* Comprehensive lightning protection systems safeguard electrical components and structures.

Geological and Hydrometeorological Events

Considerations extend to landslides, volcanic ash, prolonged droughts, and excessive precipitation, all of which could impact water sources for cooling. Site-specific studies can inform protective measures against such localized risks.

A Layered Approach: Defense-in-Depth

The overarching philosophy of nuclear safety is "Defense-in-Depth," a multi-layered approach that ensures safety even if one or more barriers fail to work. This includes:

- *Preventing abnormal operation:* High-quality design, construction, and operation.
- *Controlling abnormal operation:* Safety systems that automatically intervene during upsets.
- *Mitigating accident consequences:* Containment structures and emergency cooling.
- *Mitigating severe accidents:* Measures to prevent core melting or minimize its off-site impact.
- *Emergency preparedness:* On-site and off-site plans for evacuation, communication, and response are required.

Post-Fukushima, a global effort known as "stress tests" was initiated, prompting NPPs to assess and enhance their resilience against even the most extreme natural events, leading to upgrades in cooling capabilities, backup power, and severe-accident management.

The journey towards a sustainable energy future demands a pragmatic approach to nuclear power. The abstract fear of nuclear accidents must be balanced by a concrete understanding of the formidable safety measures currently in place. Modern nuclear reactor safety is not an afterthought; it is an intrinsic element of the design, driven by continuous learning, rigorous regulation, and cutting-edge engineering [6].

By meticulously evaluating seismic risks, integrating advanced passive and active protection systems, and preparing for a wide array of natural disasters, the nuclear industry is building a future in which these powerful energy sources can operate with unprecedented levels of safety and resilience. The continued commitment to innovation and transparency in these areas is paramount to earning and maintaining the public trust necessary for nuclear energy to play its vital role in combating climate change and ensuring global energy security [7].

NUCLEAR REACTOR SAFETY AND NATURAL DISASTER PROTECTION

Nuclear power, a potent source of low-carbon energy, inherently carries significant responsibility to ensure the utmost safety. The potential consequences of an uncontrolled release of radioactive material necessitate a rigorous, multi-layered approach to design and operation, particularly when faced with the unpredictable forces of nature. Seismic activity and other natural disasters pose unique challenges that nuclear engineers and regulators have meticulously addressed, constantly evolving their strategies based on scientific understanding, technological advancements, and lessons learnt from past events [8].

The journey towards robust natural disaster protection begins long before the first shovel breaks the ground. Site selection is a critical initial step that involves extensive geological and environmental studies. Locations were meticulously chosen to avoid known active fault lines, floodplains, and areas prone to tsunamis, landslides, or extreme weather phenomena. If a site cannot be entirely free of such risks, the design must demonstrably mitigate them [9].

Once a site is selected, engineers define a "design basis" for various natural hazards. For earthquakes, this involves calculating the "DBE" and the more severe "Safe Shutdown Earthquake (SSE)"—the maximum historical or predicted seismic event for the region, plus a significant safety margin. Structures, systems, and components vital for safety must be designed to withstand these forces, ensuring that the reactor can be safely shut down and cooled even under extreme conditions [10].

Earthquakes are a primary concern because of their sudden onset and potential for widespread damage. Nuclear reactors employ several layers of seismic protection.

- *Robust structural design:* Reactor buildings, containment structures, and critical auxiliary buildings are constructed using immensely strong, heavily reinforced concrete and steel. These "seismically qualified" structures are designed to deform elastically under earthquake forces and return to their original shape without compromising their integrity. This includes deep foundations anchored into the bedrock.
- *Component qualification:* It is not just the buildings; every safety-critical piece of equipment (pumps, valves, control systems, and electrical cabinets) undergoes rigorous testing to prove that it can function during and after a DBE. This may involve shake table tests that simulate seismic vibrations.
- *Redundancy, diversity, and independence (RDI):* Safety systems are built with multiple redundant trains. For example, there may be several independent emergency cooling pumps, each capable of performing the required function. Diversity refers to the use of different types of equipment or design principles to achieve the same safety function, thereby preventing common-mode failures. Independence ensures that failure in one system does not propagate to others.
- *Flexible connections & isolation:* While less common for the main reactor building itself, flexible connections are used for piping and electrical conduits to absorb movement. In some applications within a plant or for certain components, passive seismic isolation technologies (such as base isolators that dissipate energy) can be employed to decouple structures from ground motion, although the primary defense remains brute-force strength for the core structures.
- *Rapid shutdown (SCRAM):* Nuclear reactors are equipped with automatic systems that detect abnormal seismic activity and immediately insert control rods into the core, shutting down the nuclear chain reaction within seconds. This "SCRAM" or "reactor trip" is the first and most critical response to an emergency.

While earthquakes often dominate safety discussions, nuclear plants are designed to withstand a wide array of other natural phenomena.

- *Tsunamis:* The Fukushima Daiichi accident in 2011 highlighted the need for enhanced tsunami protection. Modern designs and upgrades to existing plants incorporate taller and stronger sea walls, elevated critical equipment (including backup generators and cooling systems), and portable, deployable safety equipment, such as mobile generators and pumps that can be brought in from off-site. Thorough probabilistic tsunami hazard assessments are now standard.
- *Flooding:* Beyond tsunamis, plants are protected from riverine and heavy rainfall flooding through site elevation, robust flood barriers, and internal compartment designs that can prevent water from reaching the critical equipment. Sumps and dewatering systems are also installed.
- *High winds and tornadoes:* Reactor buildings and critical facilities are designed to withstand extreme wind loads, including the impact of wind-borne missiles (e.g., utility poles and cars) associated with tornadoes. This often involves hardened concrete walls and missile-resistant doors in the design.

- *Extreme temperatures:* Plants are designed to operate safely across a wide range of ambient temperatures, from extreme cold to intense heat. This includes robust heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems and cooling water systems designed for specific temperature ranges.
- *Volcanic activity:* For plants located near volcanic regions, designs account for potential ashfall (which can clog filters and interfere with electrical systems), lava flows (by careful site selection), and seismic activity associated with eruptions.

The regulatory framework for nuclear safety is exceptionally strict. National regulatory bodies, often guided by international standards set by organizations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), oversee every aspect of a nuclear plant's lifecycle, from site selection and design approval to construction, operation, and eventual decommissioning.

Post-Fukushima, a global re-evaluation of external hazards led to "stress tests" and significant enhancements across industries. Many plants have implemented new defensive measures, such as hardened storage for mobile safety equipment, enhanced flood protection, and diversified power sources. This event underscored the importance of anticipating "beyond design basis" events and ensuring that residual risk is minimized.

Furthermore, plants undergo periodic safety reviews, typically every 10 years, during which they are re-evaluated against the latest safety standards, scientific understanding, and operating experience. This commitment to continuous improvement ensures that nuclear safety measures evolve, adapting to new knowledge and environmental changes, such as climate change, which may alter the frequency or intensity of certain natural phenomena.

Protecting nuclear reactors from natural disasters is a cornerstone of nuclear safety, built on a foundation of meticulous site selection, robust engineering, redundant systems, and a culture of continuous improvement. While no human endeavor can ever claim absolute immunity from the forces of nature, the nuclear industry's multi-layered defense-in-depth approach, encompassing passive and active safety features, rigorous regulatory oversight, and learning from experience, aims to ensure that even in the face of nature's most formidable challenges, nuclear power remains a safe and reliable energy source.

THE DESIGN OF SEISMIC AND NATURAL DISASTER PROTECTION IN NUCLEAR REACTOR SAFETY

Nuclear power is at a crucial crossroads. As the world seeks reliable, carbon-free energy sources to combat climate change, the promise of nuclear energy as a baseload power provider cannot be denied. However, public trust relies entirely on unwavering commitment to safety. At the heart of this commitment lies the meticulous design and implementation of defenses against nature's most destructive forces: earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, extreme weather, and even wildfires.

The catastrophic events at Chornobyl in 1986 and Fukushima Daiichi in 2011 serve as stark reminders of the immense stakes involved in nuclear energy production. While Chornobyl was a result of human error and design flaws, Fukushima demonstrated the devastating potential of a confluence of natural disasters, overwhelming even well-designed safety systems. The lessons learnt from these events have driven a relentless pursuit of enhanced resilience, making natural disaster protection a cornerstone of modern nuclear reactor safety.

The overarching principle guiding nuclear reactor safety is "Defense-in-Depth." This philosophy creates multiple, independent layers of protection to prevent accidents and mitigate their consequences, if they occur. For natural hazards, this translates to:

1. *Site selection:* The first line of defense. NPPs are chosen after exhaustive geological, hydrological, and meteorological studies. Sites near active fault lines, in high tsunami inundation zones, or within frequently flooded areas were avoided. Historical data, geological surveys, and advanced modeling are used to determine design basis events, which are the most severe natural phenomena that a plant is expected to withstand with a high degree of confidence.
2. *Robust design and construction:* Buildings and systems are engineered to withstand the most extreme predicted natural events. This includes:

Seismic Design

- *Ground motion prediction:* Detailed probabilistic seismic hazard assessments (PSHAs) were conducted to determine the maximum credible ground acceleration and spectral response, far exceeding the typical building codes.
- *Hardened structures:* Reactor buildings, containment structures, and critical safety systems (such as control rooms, emergency cooling systems, and spent fuel pools) are constructed from heavily reinforced concrete and steel, designed to remain intact and functional during and after a severe earthquake.
- *Seismic isolation:* Some newer designs and upgrades incorporate base isolation systems in which the entire structure rests on flexible bearings (e.g., lead-rubber bearings). These bearings absorb and dissipate seismic energy, decoupling the structure from the ground motion and significantly reducing the forces transmitted to the reactor and safety equipment.
- *Equipment qualification:* All safety-related components, from pumps and valves to electrical cabinets, undergo rigorous seismic qualification tests, often on shaker tables, to demonstrate their ability to operate reliably during and after an earthquake. Anchoring and bracing are meticulously designed to prevent displacements or damage.

Tsunami and Flood Protection

- *Elevated critical systems:* Following Fukushima, the elevation of critical equipment (e.g., emergency generators and switchgear) above the maximum probable flood and tsunami levels has become standard.
- *Hardened seawalls and barriers:* Strengthened and heightened seawalls, breakwaters, and floodgates are designed to withstand massive wave forces and prevent the inundation of vital areas.
- *Redundant water protection:* Multiple independent flood protection layers, including redundant drainage systems and pumps, ensure that water cannot compromise safety systems.

Extreme Weather Protection

- *High wind and missile protection:* Structures are designed to withstand extreme wind loads (hurricanes, tornadoes) and protect against flying debris (missiles) using robust materials and reinforced outer shells.
- *Snow and ice loading:* Roofs and structures are designed to bear heavy snow and ice loads, and critical outdoor equipment is protected from freezing conditions.
- *Heatwaves and drought:* Adequate cooling water sources and robust cooling system designs are crucial, with provisions for cooling towers or alternative water supplies during prolonged drought conditions.
- *Wildfire mitigation:* Plants are surrounded by clear zones, use fire-resistant materials, and have dedicated fire suppression systems to protect against approaching wildfires.

Safety Systems and Emergency Preparedness

In addition to structural integrity, multiple active and passive safety systems are in place to ensure reactor shutdown and core cooling, even if external power is lost.

- *Redundancy, diversity, and independence:* Safety systems are designed with RDI. For instance, multiple independent emergency diesel generators (often located in different hardened buildings) provide power if the main grid fails. Backup cooling pumps have diverse power sources (e.g., battery-powered and steam-driven).
- *Passive safety features:* Modern and advanced reactor designs (e.g., Generation III+ and IV reactors, such as AP1000, EPR, and SMRs) increasingly incorporate passive safety systems that rely on natural phenomena (gravity, convection, and natural circulation) rather than active components (pumps, valves, and external power) to achieve safe shutdown and cooling. This inherently enhances resilience against natural disasters that may disable active systems.
- *Beyond design basis event planning:* Post-Fukushima, regulators worldwide mandated "stress tests" to assess plant resilience against events exceeding the original design basis. This led to enhancements such as additional mobile equipment (e.g., portable generators, pumps, and hoses) stored off-site and deployed quickly to restore cooling and power in extreme scenarios. Enhanced emergency response plans include improved communication, training, and coordination with the local authorities.

The increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events owing to climate change present new challenges. Nuclear power plant operators and regulators are continually re-evaluating design basis assumptions, conducting new hazard assessments, and implementing upgrades to account for shifting climate patterns, including rising sea levels, more severe storms, and prolonged heat waves.

Advanced reactor designs, such as small modular reactors (SMRs) and Generation IV reactors, are being developed with inherent safety features that further enhance natural disaster resilience. Many are designed to be underground or semi-underground, providing natural shielding from external hazards. Their smaller size and modular construction allow for more flexible sitting and potentially faster deployment of robust, standardized designs.

The design of seismic and natural disaster protection in nuclear reactor safety is a testament to meticulous engineering and continuous improvement of humanity. It is a highly complex, multidisciplinary endeavor that combines cutting-edge science, rigorous engineering, and a profound commitment to public safety. While no human endeavor can ever be entirely risk-free, the nuclear industry's relentless focus on understanding, planning for, and mitigating the impacts of natural disasters ensures that nuclear power remains a viable, safe, and increasingly resilient option for our global energy future. This ongoing vigilance and adaptation are not just regulatory requirements; they are the bedrock upon which trust in nuclear energy is built.

DISCUSSION

The immense power of nuclear energy, a vital component in the global quest for clean and sustainable electricity, comes with an equally immense responsibility of ensuring its absolute safety. While the controlled fission process itself is inherently robust, the potential for interaction with natural phenomena, from the ground-shaking violence of earthquakes to the destructive force of tsunamis and extreme weather, necessitates an unparalleled level of engineering foresight and protective measures. The discussion surrounding nuclear reactor safety, particularly in the face of seismic activity and other natural disasters, is a cornerstone of the industry's design, regulation, and public trust.

NPPs are complex marvels of engineering designed to contain and manage incredibly high energy densities. Their long operational lifespans imply that they must withstand not only expected but also statistically improbable natural events that could occur over decades. The 2011 Fukushima Daiichi accident, triggered by a massive earthquake and tsunami, served as a stark global reminder of this vulnerability, prompting a worldwide re-evaluation of safety standards and the implementation of more stringent protective measures.

Protecting nuclear reactors from earthquakes is perhaps the most critical and extensively studied aspect of natural disaster preparedness. This strategy involves multiple layers of defense.

Site Selection

The first line of defense is to choose a geologically stable location far from active fault lines and areas prone to liquefaction (where soil loses strength during an earthquake). Extensive geological surveys, including seismic hazard assessments, have been conducted over decades to understand a site's potential for ground motion.

Design Basis Earthquake

Reactors are not merely built to withstand historical earthquakes but are designed to survive a hypothetical "DBE"—an event with a very low probability of occurrence but a very high level of ground motion. This often means designing for magnitudes and intensities that far exceed any recorded event at the site.

Robust Structural Engineering

- *Reinforced concrete and steel:* Reactor buildings, containment structures, and critical safety systems are constructed from massive amounts of reinforced concrete and specialized steel designed to absorb and dissipate seismic energy without catastrophic failure.
- *Flexibility and rigidity:* Structures are designed with a careful balance of rigidity (to resist deformation) and flexibility (to allow for movement during shaking).
- *Redundancy and separation:* Critical safety systems (e.g., cooling systems and emergency power) are often redundant and physically separated within the plant to ensure that if one system is affected, another can take over.

Advanced Seismic Technologies

- *Seismic isolation:* For newer designs or retrofits, base isolation systems are being explored or implemented in new designs or retrofits. These involve placing the entire reactor building on flexible bearings (e.g., lead-rubber bearings and friction pendulums) that decouple the structure from ground motion, significantly reducing the forces transmitted to the building.
- *Energy dissipation devices:* Devices such as viscous dampers, similar to shock absorbers, can be integrated into structures to dissipate seismic energy and minimize structural response.

Instrumentation and Monitoring

Reactors are equipped with sophisticated seismic monitoring systems that can detect minor tremors. In the event of significant ground motion, these systems can automatically trigger safety shutdowns (scrams) and activate the emergency cooling protocols.

While seismic protection is paramount, nuclear safety extends to a broader spectrum of natural threats.

- *Flooding and tsunamis:* The lessons of Fukushima led to a widespread re-evaluation of flood protection. This includes:
- *Elevated structures and critical equipment:* Key safety systems, emergency generators, and electrical switchgear are often placed at higher elevations or in hardened, waterproof bunkers.
- *Robust sea walls and barriers:* New and reinforced sea walls, breakwaters, and floodgates are designed to withstand maximum credible tsunami heights and storm surges.
- *Passive cooling systems:* Next-generation reactors (such as small modular reactors) increasingly incorporate passive cooling systems that rely on natural circulation, convection, and gravity, requiring no active power or pumps to cool the core in an emergency, even if external power and water sources are lost.

Extreme Weather Events

- *Hurricanes and typhoons:* Structures are designed for extreme wind loads, and nonessential external equipment is secured. Robust backup power systems, which are often submerged or hardened against wind and water, are essential.
- *Tornadoes:* Reactor buildings and critical facilities are designed as “tornado-hardened” structures, strong enough to resist extreme wind pressures and the impact of flying debris.
- *Extreme temperatures:* Systems are designed to operate safely across a wide range of ambient temperatures, from severe cold (blizzards) that could affect cooling water intake or equipment to extreme heat that tests cooling efficiency.
- *Heavy snow and ice:* Roofs are designed for significant snow loads, and de-icing measures are implemented for critical external components.

Volcanic Activity

For reactors in seismically active areas with volcanic potential, plans must account for ashfall (which can clog air intakes and affect electrical systems), ground deformation, and potential lava flows.

Wildfires

Buffer zones, fire-resistant materials, and fire suppression systems are implemented to protect against the threat of wildfires, particularly in forested regions.

Underpinning all these protective measures is the concept of “Defense-in-Depth,” a series of independent, overlapping layers of protection designed to prevent accidents and, if one layer fails, to mitigate the consequences of that failure. For natural disasters, this means

- *Preventing damage:* Site selection, robust design, and protective barriers.
- *Controlling the event:* Automatic shutdown systems, emergency cooling.
- *Containing release:* Strong containment buildings, filtration systems.
- *Emergency preparedness:* On-site and off-site emergency response plans and evacuation procedures.

National regulatory bodies (such as the U.S. NRC, UK ONR, and French ASN) and international organizations (such as the IAEA) play crucial roles. They establish stringent safety standards, conduct rigorous licensing processes, perform inspections, and mandate post-event reviews and stress testing. The lessons learnt from events like Fukushima have led to continuous upgrades and revised safety requirements globally, ensuring that safeguards evolve with new understanding and technologies.

CONCLUSION

The discussion on nuclear reactor safety using seismic and natural disaster protection is not static; it is an ongoing adaptive process driven by scientific advancement, engineering innovation, and the imperative of learning from experience. While no human endeavor can guarantee absolute risk elimination, the nuclear industry’s commitment to defense-in-depth, robust design, continuous monitoring, and stringent regulatory oversight aims to reduce the risks associated with natural phenomena to the lowest practicable level. As the world increasingly turns to nuclear power as a reliable, low-carbon energy source, this unwavering dedication to safety remains the foundation of its social license to operate.

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