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Illegals at power plant prompt call for legislation

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Illegal aliens using false Social Security numbers were able to enter and work as contract painters at a power plant in Florida, including work near one nuclear reactor.

Officials at Progress Energy, which runs the Crystal River Energy Complex in Citrus County, say they followed federal regulations and that the contractor should have better vetted its employees.

Now a congresswoman is calling for hearings on how the lapse could have happened and calling for the Senate to pass a bill cracking down on illegal aliens' ability to obtain government identification.

"We certainly don't want to have one illegal alien at a nuclear power plant, let alone several," said Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite, Florida Republican. "According to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Progress Energy did absolutely nothing wrong. They followed the guidelines. But in today's world, the terrorists are just itching to get at us. We need to have more assurances than just pass to the contractor that's been hired."

She said the incident illustrated the need for the Senate to pass the REAL ID act, which passed the House in February and sets national standards for the use of driver's licenses in federal facilities -- an incentive for states to make sure applicants are in the country legally.

Progress Energy said at least two workers used identification with false Social Security numbers to enter the facility as part of their contract job, and officials at the Florida Gulf Coast Building and Construction Trades Council said the number could be as high as seven.

The individuals worked for Brock Specialty Services, a Texas-based company that was hired to do maintenance at the facility.

Progress Energy spokesman Rick Kimble said the energy company followed the NRC's guidelines. "Point blank, it should not have happened. We obviously should be taking steps in the future to make sure it does not happen," he said. "But we followed the regulations that were required. We also think the contractor had an obligation to do pre-screening as well."

Brock officials couldn't be reached for comment.

Mr. Kimble said the NRC requires that persons admitted to power plants have valid government-issued identification, which these workers had. He said the men provided Social Security numbers to be matched against law-enforcement databases, but the false numbers the workers gave didn't raise any red flags.

He said the plant has four fossil fuel units and one reactor. He said just one person who submitted a false Social Security number had access to the nuclear unit, and he, like any other visitor, had a constant escort.

The building and construction union first raised the issue as part of a complaint about contractors at the power company. Michael J. Jeske, secretary-treasurer for the union, said no matter how the workers managed to gain access, something was broken.

"That doesn't give the local community a very good feeling, if you have a situation where undocumented foreigners can get access to a nuclear power plant and that doesn't violate

anything," he said.

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