

BLUEGRASS BEACON

with
JIM WATERS



A cloud of fear mongering mushrooms after Japan's tsunami

By Jim Waters

“After whatever disaster befalls us, being intelligent humans, we can almost always learn from it and do better in the future,” said physicist Steven C. Barrowes, Ph.D., of Radcliff.

The purveyors of fear among us should heed that advice when it comes to discussing [nuclear power](#) plants in Kentucky — especially considering what happened with Japan's nuclear reactors following the epic earthquake and tsunami that struck the country.

First, let's be clear about what did *not* happen in Japan. Powerful though it was, the 9.0 magnitude earthquake did not cause the meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi plant. The tsunami that followed it prevented an orderly shutdown by sweeping away the diesel fuel tanks that kept the reactor control circuits working.

Plant controllers suddenly were “flying blind,” with no way to quickly regain control, said Barrowes, a former researcher at the National Cold Fusion Institute in Salt Lake City.

“Turning off a nuclear reactor is not as simple as flipping a light switch,” he said. “It's more like making an emergency landing in a large airplane.”

And that offers a teaching moment, as they say.

“The lesson we must learn is that control must be maintained, even after the worst conceivable earthquake or other natural disaster,” Barrowes said.

Even Japanese officials admitted they learned something: that the agency overseeing nuclear safety should operate independently of those promoting the nuclear industry.

Learning lessons from disasters is reasonable.

What's unreasonable is “throwing the baby out with the bath water” by halting nuclear power production just because diesel fuel tanks washed out to sea during a tsunami in a nation surrounded by water.

After the Japanese tragedy, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that all 17 of her country's nuclear power plants would close within 11 years. Merkel's decision serves not only as an example of the worst kind of fear mongering for political gain, but it could produce some disastrous economic aftershocks for Europe.

Kentucky is immune from tsunamis but not from such alarmists.

For several years now, Sen. Bob Leeper, I-Paducah, has [introduced legislation](#) to lift Kentucky's 27-year ban on building nuclear power plants in the state.

During this year's legislative session, Sen. Robin Webb, D-Grayson, used what happened in Japan to support her arguments against nuclear power plants in Kentucky, telling reporters: "The best-built, best-operated, best-regulated systems in the world are in Japan. But natural disasters still can occur that put people at risk."

Yes, and accidents can occur that kill people — sometimes lots of people, including the 1,517 who died with the sinking of the Titanic.

Among the important lessons learned: be diligent, man the radios, carry a sufficient number of lifeboats, slow down in iceberg-infested water and don't use brittle steel for hulls.

But quit building ocean liners?

When Comair Flight 5191 took off on the wrong Blue Grass Airport runway a few years ago and crashed — killing 49 people, including a couple married the previous day — the follow-up included a lot of inspection, introspection and justified criticism.

We learned some important lessons. New procedures required pilots to check more frequently to ensure use of the correct runway. Control-tower practices changed.

But no one suggested the country shut down all the airlines.

"In the U.S., not one person operating a nuclear reactor has been harmed by radiation in half a century of operation," Barrowes said. "Yet, some people who know little to nothing still are able to dream up fears of mushroom clouds and scorched, uninhabitable regions of earth."

Shun the fear mongers.

Instead, follow the advice of the Irish author James Joyce, who said: "Mistakes are the portals of discovery."

Lift Kentucky's ban on nuclear power.

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