

that the public ought to have a say in the process of significant licensing procedures."

He said the complicating effects of an earthquake haven't been evaluated thoroughly enough, both for the expanded racks and for the initial operating licenses.

The NRC often violates its regulations on public input, he said.

"The commission simply has to understand the public is a legitimate participant in the regulatory process and that they need to be treated that way," said Asselstine. But, he said, the public's role is quickly decreasing.

He is afraid that if the NRC and the industry don't listen to the public, a serious accident — comparable to the 1979 Three Mile Island accident — is inevitable at a U.S. plant within 20 years.

That assessment is based not only on safety studies at the various plants, but also on operating experience, he said. There have been too many losses of safety systems from mechanical failures and operating

mistakes, he said.

Asselstine also predicted that a national storage center for radioactive spent fuel won't be coming very soon.

The way the Department of Energy has gone about selecting a site isn't the way Congress intended, Asselstine said. "Nor has it been done in such a way that is likely to yield a safe ... solution within a reasonable period of time.

"I think it's time to rethink the high-level waste program and to take a hard look at how the Department of Energy has managed that program and to take a look at whether somebody else should oversee the program — somebody that the public and the states can have confidence in."

Asselstine was an attorney with the NRC before being appointed to the commission. He also was counsel for the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy as well as for the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.