

Testimony of Audrey Bennett,
President, Prairie Island Tribal Council
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Homeland Security July 30th Hearing

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Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and committee members. My name is Audrey Bennett, and I'm president of the Prairie Island Indian Community. Thank you for inviting me to testify today.

I'm here to offer this committee a perspective that is unique to our community, but emblematic of the homeland security issues with which many tribal governments in this country must contend.

For your reference, we have provided an aerial photo of Prairie Island, which is located between the Mississippi and Vermillion Rivers in southeastern Minnesota, about 50 miles south and east of Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Prairie Island is sacred land. Our people have lived there for countless generations. It is our home as well as the final resting place for our ancestors.

As you can see, our reservation is bordered by a nuclear power plant and nuclear waste storage site. Two nuclear reactors and seventeen large storage casks filled with highly radioactive nuclear waste sit just 600 yards from our homes, church, community center and business. Additional storage casks will be added in the coming years.

Our community is the closest in the nation to a nuclear power plant and nuclear waste storage site – yet we have no special role in helping to protect these facilities, or for that matter, ourselves.

For decades, well before terrorism became the issue that it is today, our tribe had to fight to be properly recognized by the state of Minnesota and our utility neighbor. In 1979, when the plant was evacuated after a steam generator leaked radiation into the atmosphere, no one bothered to inform our people about the incident. Most tribal members realized something was wrong only after witnessing numerous cars speeding away from the plant. Many of us wisely followed.

Today we are better prepared for a similar incident, and we have a reasonably cooperative relationship with the plant and the state. However, conventional emergency planning is simply inadequate for this age of catastrophic terrorism. The radiological exercises that we participate in are based on scenarios involving a slow leak of radiation into the atmosphere, not an intentional act of destruction. Currently, our involvement in responding to such an event is, at best, ill-defined. And as I mentioned previously we have no formal role whatsoever in helping to prevent an attack, an attack that would permanently devastate our community.

Now imagine being reminded of this vulnerability every time you leave your house or look out your window. Imagine in this day of color-coded warnings and credible threats, fearing the worst every time an airplane flies by or a news helicopter hovers over the neighboring nuclear plant. Imagine, and this happened just recently, driving down a road only to see military Humvees stationed at your intersection without any explanation or notice.

This is what we live with every day. We are uninformed. We are victims in waiting.

Under the existing system we also have little to no independent recourse should the worst occur. Instead, we are largely subject to state authority. This was evidenced recently when our community was affected by major flooding, and we had to go through the state to access federal resources.

Our tribal government is ultimately responsible for the health and safety of as many as 10,000 people, including our tribal members, employees and visitors. Many thousands more live just beyond our reservation. Their fate along with ours is tied to the safe, secure operation of the nuclear power plant – a reality not lost on most Minnesotans.

According to a January 2003 poll, nearly 60 percent of Minnesotans say they are concerned that the state's nuclear power plants could be targeted for terrorism. And 54 percent say that they would need to live at least 50 miles from a nuclear power plant to feel safe.

Having lived much of our lives in the shadow of a nuclear facility, we share their concern. We share their concern because we know more can be done to ensure our safety.

To start, we need to be involved in emergency planning and terrorism prevention initiatives. And we need the resources for staff to help us maintain our readiness. We have the most to lose in an attack and we can't afford not to be prepared.

We also need access to information. We should be notified of events before reading about them in the newspaper or experiencing them first hand. There should be a resource within the Department of Homeland Security that is committed to helping keep our community informed and prepared.

Reservation lands located along our nation's borders and near critical infrastructure such as dams, hydroelectric facilities and nuclear power plants are vulnerable. Tribal governments should be given the mandate

and resources needed to help keep these areas safe. Furthermore, in keeping with the federal government's trust responsibility to tribes, the Department of Homeland Security should be required to deal with tribes on a government-to-government basis – just as any other federal agency would.

Clearly, if it is going to be effective, the Homeland Security Act must involve tribes and be inclusive of tribal interests. It should recognize the needs of tribal governments and demand the same vigilance of us that is expected from others charged with protecting this nation.

On behalf of our community and tribal council, thank you again for the opportunity to testify here today. Each of us has an obligation as Americans to do our part to protect the homeland. We pledge our full cooperation in this matter and welcome the opportunity to do our part.

Mr. Chairman, I'd be happy to answer any questions.