

Statistically speaking it was a howling success

Early in March, 1984, under federal government direction, the largest and most expensive nuclear disaster drill ever attempted in this country was conducted in Florida. The drill centered around Florida Power and Light Company's St. Lucie nuclear plant which is located on Hutchinson Island, a barrier beach stretching some thirty miles along Florida's east coast, north of Palm Beach and south of Cape Canaveral. The drill was a joke.

Everyone living within a ten-mile radius of the plant was presumed to be evacuated, but the only public signals supplied were a few moments of wailing sirens that could not be heard inside a building. No evacuation whatsoever, either of the island itself or of surrounding communities, was attempted. Had the disaster been real instead of a drill, chaos would have been the inevitable result.

Access to the mainland from the sections of the island within the ten-mile radius of the nuke plant is supplied by three two-lane causeways and bridges that cross the Indian River and empty, in all three instances, into highly congested, thickly-populated communities. Two of those communities are within the ten-mile radius and would, according to plans, also be subject to evacuation. The third community is the City of Stuart, located approximately 15 miles from the nuke plant. Stuart is the county seat and the area's principal shopping and business center.

Traffic to, from, and on Hutchinson Island is a problem even when everyone on the island is not attempting to leave it at the same time. Traffic on the mainland roads and highways approaching the island bridges is also very congested a great deal of the time.

Over 10,000 people live on the island in winter (the "season" in Florida); not only are there two enormous mobile home parks, there are also dozens of high-rise condominium buildings in addition to numerous developments of con-

miniums of the villa or town house variety. To further complicate matters, thousands of people flock from the mainland to the island's long stretches of Atlantic beaches on every pleasant day.

Ten years ago when plans for the nuke plant were on the drawing board, the island's population was probably less than a thousand. A tourist, looking for an isolated spot to "get away from it all" found exactly that on Hutchinson Island. It was practically uninhabited with no more than a handful of mobile homes, no condos, no high-rise apartment buildings, and no motels. In fact, the federal government's figures (upon which federal officials were basing their disaster evacuation plans) indicated the island's population was 100!

Eleven federal agencies participated in the nuclear disaster drill. It was the first to attract national media coverage. Unfortunately, the national coverage provided prior to the drill far exceeded that given after it was over. Considering the expense of coordinating the 11 federal agencies with all the various local and state agencies which participated, and given the errors in logistics (such as dealing with upwards of 15,000 automobiles all trying to use the same three bridges at once when you are expecting only 75 or 100!), the rehash deserved far wider exposure.

Perhaps one reason national media virtually ignored the results of the drill was that, in spite of the absurdities and the physical impossibility of coping with an actual disaster by evacuating Hutchinson Island, the official position at its close was that the drill had been "extremely successful."

Maybe...maybe from the point of view of bringing their statistics up to date... it was successful. What plans are being made, we can't help wondering, to implement an evacuation of thousands of panicky people from this island should a nuclear emergency ever actually take place?

Was the drill a howling success from that point of view?