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NRC UPDATES VERMONT PUBLIC SERVICE BOARD ON STATUS OF VERMONT YANKEE UPRATE REVIEW

MONTPELIER, Vt. - The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) informed the Vermont Public Service Board Monday it will only approve the request by the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant to produce higher levels of electricity if the agency finds that the plant can operate safely at that level.

During the discussions, agency officials also detailed the additional safety inspections due at Vermont Yankee in August as part of a new pilot program to enhance engineering inspections of the nation's operating nuclear reactors.

"The expanded engineering inspection will provide additional confirmation, beyond the routine inspection program, of the Vermont Yankee plant design as we consider whether or not we should approve the power uprate," Bill Ruland, the NRC power uprate manager, told the Board.

"Entergy must provide sufficient justification to prove to us that safety is maintained," Ruland said. "They aren't there yet."

Ruland and two other senior NRC officials appeared before the Board to outline the process to be used in the additional engineering inspections. They emphasized that the inspection is focused on safety, but noted that in certain cases, safety issues can also involve reliability issues. The uprate review is expected to last through January 2005.

NRC officials also said that Vermonters and others interested in the uprate issue will have several opportunities to comment either in writing, or in person at meetings, including at the conclusion of the inspection.

Also speaking before the Board was Stuart Richards, chief of the Inspection Program Branch of the NRC's Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation. He said the new inspection program will make its debut at Vermont Yankee in August, and run at least three weeks. He said the program will later be used at three additional reactors. The amount of time devoted to the examination is a significant increase beyond the current engineering inspection process.

Brian Holian, the NRC manager responsible for inspection oversight at the plant, said the

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independent inspection team would include at least seven individuals. The team's leader will come from outside the NRC's Region I office, which oversees Vermont Yankee. The team will include NRC inspectors who have not worked at the plant in recent years, and private sector nuclear engineering experts.

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