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Vermont Yankee News Clips, July 29, 2004

Nuclear plant has Vermont nervous
 Erika Cohen, Sentinel Staff

Keene Sentinel, July 28, 2004
 Front Page
 Located at the top of the page

VERNON, Vt. - The number of wary eyes turned toward the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant has been growing in the last month and a half, as more and more reportedly "minor" incidents have residents wondering when enough is enough.

For some Vermont officials, that point is seemingly inches away.

David O'Brien, commissioner of the Vermont Department of Public Service, said Tuesday Vermont may intervene in the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's review of the 32-year-old plant's application to increase electricity output by 20 percent.

O'Brien said the state is concerned the NRC has not adequately answered questions raised by the state nuclear engineer about the plant's ability to cool the nuclear reactor in an emergency.

That concern piggybacks on a longer list raised by recent events at Vermont Yankee and the NRC:

* In mid-June, New Hampshire officials were alerted about a transformer fire at the nuclear power plant before Vermont officials knew about it. The problem turned out to be relatively minor.

* On July 14, plant officials announced they had found three spent fuel-rod segments missing for more than three months. The rods were found in the plant's spent-fuel pool inside a "unique aluminum cylinder that was previously thought to be part of an existing in-pool structure," the NRC Web

C-44

site reported.

* Last week, parts of the emergency alert system in Vermont were inadvertently shut down by a utility worker, but it took days for plant and state officials to be notified of the problem.

"How many warnings in the form of Vermont Yankee "minor" failures are we entitled to received?" asked Raymond G. Shadis of the New England Coalition in an e-mail after the alert system failure. "I respectfully request that readers consider the time-honored proposition that it is better to be active today than radioactive tomorrow. We may be sleeping well, but we are assuredly not sleeping secure."

The New England Coalition, an anti-nuclear group, has been working to block the power uprate.

The plant is also plagued by other problems it - and the NRC - can't seem to solve, most notably cracks in the steam dryer.

The steam dryer, located on top of the reactor vessel, removes excess moisture from steam before it leaves the reactor and goes to the turbine that generates electricity.

While plant and NRC officials say the steam dryer serves as a "non-safety-related function," it is connected to the reactor vessel and NRC officials admit they do not know how to solve the problem.

Seam dryer cracks, the main problem related to power uprates at boiling-water reactors around the country, is "the biggest issue" for the NRC, said Rick B. Ennis, the project manager for Vermont Yankee.

Vermont Yankee officials do not deny mistakes have been made, but they defend their efforts to solve them.

"The recent problems should be viewed with appropriate perspective," said Rob Williams, spokesman for Vermont Yankee, which is owned by Entergy of Louisiana. "For example, the documentation deficiency with the fuel segment location was discovered (not created) under Entergy and it was under Entergy ownership that the fuel segments were found. Entergy conducts all activities with safety being the highest priority."

He said Entergy has saved Vermont ratepayers more than \$40 million since it bought the Vermont Yankee plant two years ago, and one benefit of Entergy's ownership is that it has "financial and technical resources and expertise available to fully address problems that arise."

Nuclear experts challenge NRC on performance
By Susan Smallheer, Herald Staff

Rutland Herald, July 29, 2004
Region/State Section, Page B1
Located in the middle of the page

Two nuclear industry engineers who have studied the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant extensively have taken the unusual step of challenging federal regulators over their own regulations - saying the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, in essence, isn't doing its job.

Paul Blanch of West Hartford, Conn., and Arnold Gundersen of Burlington have filed a citizen's petition with the NRC, claiming it is unclear what standards Yankee is being held to.

Nuclear industry regulations have changed substantially over the past 35 years, and Blanch and Gundersen said it is unclear whether the 1967, 1972 or 1982 standards are being applied.

Blanch, an electrical engineer who has acted as a consultant for Entergy Nuclear at its Indian Point nuclear power plant, and Gundersen, a nuclear engineer who worked as a sub-contractor at Vermont Yankee about 12 years ago, said that the regulatory situation amounted to a "shell game."

Their petition launches a formal process. NRC has 180 days to respond to the six-page complaint that alleges the commission doesn't have a firm handle on whether Yankee is complying with its design and the NRC regulations.

"The analogy I use is the automobile industry," Blanch said. "Automobiles today have a design basis - they have to have seatbelts, air bags, anti-lock brakes, a redundant braking system - that is the design basis for cars.

"They (Vermont Yankee) don't, and we don't know whether they have it or not and they have no idea," he said, citing more than 45 pages of correspondence he had with federal and state regulators on the issue.

Blanch, who has worked closely with the NRC in the past and considers himself pro-nuclear, said that he and Gundersen are the only ones who have really studied Yankee.

"No one has really focused the way we have on Vermont Yankee; we've gotten these documents in discovery," he said, referring to the exchange of documents over the uprate case in the past year.

Blanch and Gundersen have both testified on behalf of the anti-nuclear group New England Coalition in its fight against Entergy's plans to increase power production at Vermont Yankee.

Both experts insist they are pro-nuclear and think Yankee should remain in operation - but not boost power.

Gundersen, who now teaches mathematics and physics at Burlington High School, said he felt like one of the NASA engineers who knew about the flaws that contributed to the space shuttle disaster. Those engineers went to their boss, but were ignored and they let it drop, he said.

"The risks are just so enormous," he said. "This seems to be the only way to get the NRC's attention."

Gundersen pointed to recent articles in the Cleveland Plain Dealer which uncovered NRC negligence when it came to the Davis-Besse nuclear reactor, which a recent federal report showed was close to a nuclear meltdown because of an eroded component.

Davis-Besse was one month short of a meltdown, he said, and the NRC would have kept it running except the plant shut down for normal refueling and discovered the hole.

Neil Sheehan, NRC spokesman, said the commission had just received the petition and needed time to review it.

He said the NRC had 180 days to respond and he said that the NRC had certain criteria it had to follow in evaluating the petition.

Robert Williams, spokesman for Entergy, said there was nothing new in the petition. He noted that Vermont Yankee had spent \$20 million several years ago, before it was purchased by Entergy nuclear, to review its documents to make sure the plant complied with its design.

Sheehan said that there are other citizen petitions pending. "Vermont Yankee? I'm certain of it," he said.

In the past 12 months, roughly, the NRC received about 12 petitions and only accepted four for investigation, he said.

Petitioners: NRC short on criteria needed for VY review
By Carolyn Lorie, Reformer Staff

Brattleboro Reformer, July 29, 2004
Front Page
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BRATTLEBORO — Nuclear industry whistleblowers Paul Blanch and Arnold Gundersen filed a petition with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, claiming that the regulator does not have enough information to perform an adequate inspection of Entergy Nuclear Vermont Yankee.

An engineering inspection is due to begin at the Vernon plant on Aug. 9, during which eight inspectors will spend three weeks on site. The inspection is part of the uprate review process for Vermont Yankee, which is seeking NRC approval for a 20 percent power increase.

According to Blanch and Gundersen, it is not clear how Vermont Yankee's design bases conform with current NRC regulations and without such knowledge, they claim, the upcoming engineering inspection will be meaningless.

"There's no way they can inspect a plant unless they have criteria by which to inspect it," said Blanch.

The petitioners called on the NRC to demand from Entergy "a clear and unambiguous definition of the General Design Criteria applicable to Vermont Yankee and how the facility's design conforms with or deviates from" the appropriate regulations.

In 1967, the NRC issued draft criteria for the design of all plants. Those criteria were made more stringent and then finalized in 1972. Blanch and Gundersen allege that officials from the corporate owners of the Vermont Yankee — first the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corporation and then Entergy Nuclear — have made conflicting claims about which of the criteria the plant meets.

"In 1972, Vermont Yankee's owners claimed that the reactor met the draft 1967 criteria. Then, in 1982, they stated that it met the new, harder-to-meet 1972 criteria. Then in 1998/1999, they switched back, saying that draft 1967 applied. In 2003, Entergy [which purchased the plant in 2002] stated that all 'references were for historical purposes,'" Blanch said in a prepared statement.

Blanch and Gundersen requested that the NRC take "expedited" action.

NRC spokesman Neil Sheehan said that the petition will be reviewed as quickly as possible. In order to be accepted for consideration, the petition must seek an enforcement-related action, be supported by specific details and must be the only NRC venue in which the complaint could be addressed.

If the NRC petition review board decides that the petition merits further investigation, the petitioners will be notified. The agency then has 120 days from the time of notification to take action.

On April 22, a petition was filed by the nuclear power watchdog group, the New England Coalition, which has worked closely with Blanch and Gundersen during the uprate case. That petition, which requested that the NRC require Vermont Yankee do a complete inventory of its spent fuel inventory, was not officially accepted until May 28. The regulator has not yet contacted the coalition about what action has been taken.

With the engineering assessment slated to start in less than two weeks, Blanch acknowledged that the NRC will most likely not have the design bases information Blanch and Gundersen say is necessary beforehand.

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