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Rowland, saying he was left in dark, calls NU chief to task

By MIKE McINTIRE This story ran in the Courant October 5, 1996

Saying he was kept in the dark about a serious accident at a Northeast Utilities nuclear plant over Labor Day weekend, Gov. John G. Rowland called NU Chairman Bernard M. Fox onto the carpet Friday.

Fox waited 10 minutes before Rowland ushered him into the governor's office to express his "disappointment" at not being adequately briefed on the accident when the two men met a couple of weeks ago.

Rowland said details of the incident that appeared in press reports this week showed it was far worse than he had been told.

"I was disappointed that I hadn't been properly informed of this event," Rowland said after Fox left. "I called him back in because I had not been briefed. He agreed with me, and he apologized."

Fox's press aide told a reporter outside the governor's office that the NU chairman would have no comment afterward. But Fox stopped on his way out to say that the seriousness of the Connecticut Yankee incident "called for a personal contact" with Rowland.

"I told him that we'll keep plugging away to get this and other matters corrected," Fox said.

Federal regulators who investigated the Labor Day incident said Wednesday that a number of operator and equipment errors came dangerously close to damaging the reactor's radioactive core.

Nitrogen leaked into the reactor chamber and swelled into a huge bubble, displacing water that cools the fuel rods.

The condition went undetected for four days at the plant, which has been shut down since July for repairs and refueling. When the leak was finally noticed, plant operators were able to vent the gas safely, pump water into the chamber and prevent the core from being exposed.

A Nuclear Regulatory Commission investigator said that had the nitrogen bubble grown any larger, it could have disabled a key safety system and it would have taken 52 minutes for the core to overheat.

The relationship between Rowland and NU has been strained since April, when the governor accompanied Fox on a tour of the troubled Millstone nuclear complex.

Rowland emerged from the visit and pronounced the plants safe, prompting ridicule from NU's critics, who said the governor was allowing himself to be

used as a public relations foil.

Stung by the response to his comments, Rowland ratcheted back his daily involvement in the NU crisis, curtailing contacts with Fox and abandoning plans to meet the chairman of the NRC.

Then, two weeks ago, Fox and Rowland met for the first time in months, as the NU chairman accompanied his new nuclear operations chief, Bruce Kenyon, to the capital to meet the governor. It was at that meeting that Rowland says Fox did not make clear the magnitude of the problems at Connecticut Yankee.

Rowland said Friday's meeting was a step forward in improving communications between the state and its largest electric utility.

"We agreed that, from now on, his people will provide the governor's office with a weekly briefing on events involving the nuclear plants," Rowland said. "It's important, as far as communications between us go, that we stay on track."

Note:

Was Rowland briefed about the failure of the CY ECCS for 28 years and the potential impact of this event?

Oct. 04. 1996

Mr. Bruce Kenyon
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Mr. Kenyon

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself. I am one the 104 individuals laid off in January 1996. I attended the meeting in September held at the Waterford Town Hall at which you and I briefly spoke towards the end of the evening concerning consideration on your part for rehiring those individuals terminated in January.

I understand that your time is relatively occupied with regards to the problems concerning Millstone, but please understand that in the lives of those people who were let go, this issue is the most important on our minds.

Please understand that our professional, and personal lives were totally disrupted that day in January. The majority of us are over the age of 40 and with rather limited areas of expertise that are applicable only to nuclear facilities, thus making us relatively unemployable elsewhere.

I find myself sitting here on the sidelines helpless as I watch as Millstone descend further and further. Like the other individuals laid off at the same time, we all wonder why Northeast Utilities has chosen to bring in contractors to assist rather than call us back to help.

We realize that we were not "laid-off" due to lack of work, as the work levels if anything have increased at Millstone according to the papers. With you coming on board there is new hope that you would revisit this gross mistake and hopefully rectify it.

Mr. Kenyon, I and the remaining 103 individuals place our futures in your hands and hope that you will see past the attitude of previous NU management and return us to Millstone where we can provide the assistance necessary to see Millstone through this troubled time.

I sincerely would appreciate hearing from you, either by mail, phone or would certainly be glad to meet with you to discuss this situation.

Sincerely,

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