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Bruce:

You are doing the right thing by admitting there is a problem. I also said to the Globe that it is very refreshing to see the top NU executives at these meetings in contrast to what we have seen in the past. You are heading in the right direction at last and you will have my support (for whatever it's worth) as long as you continue with this path.

Paul

Flirting with disaster; Conn. Nuclear plant has close call

By Scott Allen, Globe Staff, 10/03/96

In a near-accident reminiscent of Three Mile Island, workers at the Connecticut Yankee nuclear plant failed for three days to notice a growing gas bubble inside the reactor until it had flushed out about 15 percent of the cooling water that keeps the nuclear fuel from overheating, federal regulators said yesterday.

No one was harmed in the Sept. 1 incident, and the nuclear fuel did not overheat as it did in the Three Mile Island accident in 1979. But Connecticut Yankee's lead owner, Northeast Utilities, has already reassigned the operations manager at the plant, conceding there had been an "unacceptable reduction in the safety margin."

Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials said yesterday that the nitrogen gas bubble became a significant threat because of a series of errors, including the disconnection of equipment that measures cooling water inside the reactor. Then workers discovered that one of the two pumps used to keep the fuel cool didn't work.

"Our message to the utility is it was a very significant event to us," said Peter Habighorst, an NRC inspector at the plant. "If this had gone on without detecting it, it could have impacted the ability to cool the core" and to add water to restore the cooling water level, he said.

Because of the seriousness of the problems, the NRC sent a special "augmented inspection team" to investigate. The team made its report at the Haddam Neck plant yesterday.

The incident at Connecticut Yankee, the second-oldest operating reactor in the country, comes at a bad time for plant officials. The utilities that own Connecticut Yankee expect a report in late October on whether to continue operating the plant or shut down permanently due to weaknesses in the plant's emergency systems.

But Bruce Kenyon, the newly appointed chief of nuclear power for embattled Northeast Utilities, stressed yesterday that his top priority is ensuring

that the plant is safe. He has asked a team to come in from respected Duke Power Co. to improve procedures at Connecticut Yankee.

Paul Blanch, a former Northeast Utilities engineer who has become a harsh critic of the company, said Kenyon's attitude is a good change from the way the utility handled safety problems at Millstone nuclear plant in Connecticut, now closed because of thousands of potential safety problems.

"The first step in solving a problem is admitting you've got a problem," said Blanch.

The loss of cooling water at Connecticut Yankee began Aug. 28 when workers improperly opened a valve that allowed nitrogen gas to flow into the reactor vessel, NRC officials said. Though the valve was then closed, the seal was not tight and nitrogen gas began forcing out the cooling water.

Ordinarily, Habighorst said, operators in the control room would have noticed the falling water level immediately, but workers had disconnected water-level gauges in preparation for opening the reactor vessel to refuel. Plant officials then decided not to refuel until the owners decided the plant's fate. But workers did not reconnect the gauges.

By the time workers discovered the problem, the water level in the reactor may have dropped up to 4 1/2 feet, Habighorst said, leaving the water line 2 1/2 feet above the two pumps that prevent the core from overheating during a shutdown. Had the level dipped below the intakes for the pumps, the pumps would have been unable to continue controlling the core temperature.

Connecticut Yankee's fuel rods were always covered by at least 7 feet of water, and the water temperature didn't rise.

Some local residents who attended yesterday's briefing came away frightened. "You have the feeling that they were operating the plant with incredible arrogance," said Rosemary Bassilakis, a member of the antinuclear Citizens Awareness Network.

An extensive three-day Health/Science series on the local nuclear power industry, Nuclear Twilight in New England, is available on Globe Online at <http://www.boston.com>. The keyword is Twilight.

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