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VY Daily News

Monday, May 17, 2004

If you have news items to contribute contact Pat Lyman - plyma90@entergy.com

Brattleboro Reformer, Monday, May 17, 2004(Front page, on fold w/photo)

'All of us have lost friends'

By CAROLYN LORIE
Reformer Staff <mailto:clorie@reformer.com>

BRATTLEBORO -- Here are just a few of the people who were remembered at the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont's 17th annual Walk for Life: Michelle, who died at 27 and left behind a grieving mother and child; Patrick, who was 38 and will never know his grandson; Ron, who was 41 and survived by a mother who single-handedly raised \$13,000 for this year's walk; and Frankie -- he was 5.

"This is always an emotional day," said Susan Bell, executive director of the project. "(The walk) is a chance for the community to get together and celebrate the lives of the people we've lost."

It's also a fund-raiser that managed to bring in a record \$18,000 for the project. Among the many people who secured pledges were David Webb, Fran Duggan, Brother Stanley Deresienski from St. Michael's Roman Catholic Church, Jim Johnson and Shirley Squires.

More than 50 people gathered Saturday morning in downtown Brattleboro and made their way to the Town Common. There were people in wheelchairs, toddlers in strollers and babies carried in their parent's arms. There were children and teenagers, as well as seniors who came with walkers and canes.

Virginia Kanutsan, wearing the symbolic red ribbon and pushing a walker, came with her daughter, Sen. Jeanette White, D-Windham.

"I want to honor the memory of lots and lots of people," said White.

Sen. Roderick Gander, D-Windham, walked alongside his wife Isabel.

"This is an important event. It's an issue that constantly needs to be put before the public," said Gander.

"All of us have lost friends," he added.

Accompanied by her 2-year-old daughter, Shela Linton, a member of the Brattleboro School Board and outreach worker with ALANA Community Organization, had a list of reasons for joining the walk.

"I've had family and friends die from the disease. I collaborate with the AIDS Project (through ALANA). And it's just the right thing to do," said Linton.

Brattleboro Savings and Loan and Entergy Nuclear Vermont Yankee also thought it was the right thing to

do. Both companies served as corporate sponsors.

"We're delighted to be associated with the AIDS project," said Laurence Smith, community and corporate relations representative from Vermont Yankee.

"We believe wholeheartedly in the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont," said George Haynes, president and CEO of Brattleboro Savings and Loan, adding that the project doesn't get the attention it deserves.

Although both companies have given in years past, this year marks an increased level of support.

"By getting this kind of corporate sponsorship, it assures that the money people donate really goes to help the project fulfill its mission," said Michael Fannon, development director for the project.

Fulfilling that mission may soon be harder than ever, as the project stands poised to refuse about \$100,000 in federal money. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has instituted new mandates that require the tracking of program participants and a shift away from working with people at risk for the disease -- practices the project does not support.

"Money coming down the federal pipeline has strings attached that conflict with local values," said featured speaker Curtiss Reed, executive director of ALANA. This increases the burden on local resources, added Reed, whose organization works collaboratively with the AIDS Project.

Referring to the many signs that read "A Time to Act," Reed called the project "a manifestation of many individual acts" and encouraged the crowd to "act on a daily basis."

That was a mandate that Richard Vega has lived for many years. Former volunteer coordinator for the project and current board member, Vega was honored for his long-standing dedication to the cause.

Calling him an "early bird in AIDS work in the Brattleboro area," the project gave Vega, who was unable to attend this year's event, a gift certificate to the Walker Farm Nursery.

In addition to speeches and dedications, the day included a picnic lunch and music. The Nine O'Clock Choir from the Guilford Community Church and Hallowell, a group devoted to singing for hospice patients, joined forces for a moving set of a cappella songs.

"The AIDS Project is a model of generosity. It's just an honor to sing for them," said choir member Peter Amidon.

After the walking, singing and talking were over, the names of 50 local people who died of the disease since 1988 were read. The microphone was then turned over to anyone who wanted to say the name of a loved one they had lost.

Several people came forward, including Peggy, who is raising her grandchild because seven years ago her daughter lost her life to AIDS.

Wiping away tears, Peggy sat among the small crowd that had gathered -- old, young, Anglo- and African-Americans, gay, straight, disabled, old-time Vermonters and newcomers.

"We're all family," she said. "We've all been hit by this terrible disease."

Brattleboro Reformer, Saturday, May 15, 2004(Front page, above fold)

Watchdog accuses agency of trying to mislead public

By CAROLYN LORIE
Reformer Staff <mailto:clorie@reformer.com>

BRATTLEBORO -- Accusing representatives from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission of "lying, equivocating, obfuscating and spinning," the New England Coalition has asked NRC Chairman Nils Diaz and Commissioner Jeffrey Merrifield to investigate the inner workings of their agency.

In a letter addressed directly to Diaz and Merrifield, Raymond Shadis, technical advisor for the coalition, outlined several instances of what he referred to as "NRC staff attempts to mislead the public through obfuscation or outright false statements."

A copy of the letter was sent to Sens. James Jeffords and Patrick Leahy.

The New England Coalition, a Brattleboro-based nuclear power watchdog group, has played a central role in opposing the proposed extended power "uprate" at Entergy Nuclear Vermont Yankee.

The group served as an intervenor in the uprate case before the Public Service Board and intends to continue its opposition to the power boost throughout the NRC review process, which should be completed by early next year.

Shadis accuses the NRC Office of Public Affairs of misleading the staff of Jeffords and Leahy, as well as reporters, regarding the nature of the uprate review process.

At issue is the meaning of the term "independent safety assessment," which the coalition contends refers very specifically to a comprehensive analysis carried out at the Maine Yankee nuclear power plant in 1996.

From the start of the uprate case, the coalition has been calling on the NRC to subject Vermont Yankee to a similar assessment.

Shadis alleges that Entergy Nuclear co-opted the term "independent safety assessment," by suggesting that the normal uprate review process would encompass such an analysis.

According to Shadis's letter, the NRC supported Entergy's claim.

"They are only harming their cause. If they regard the industry as their client then they are harming their client, too," said Shadis, adding that the NRC loses credibility by engaging in "semantic games."

The letter also brings up the fuel segments missing from the plant's spent fuel pool, in connection with a comment made by NRC resident inspector David Pelton.

At a March 31 public meeting in Vernon, Pelton stated that all the spent fuel at Vermont Yankee had been accounted for and was precisely where plant officials said it was. Less than a month later, however, the two highly radioactive segments were discovered missing.

In an earlier letter to the NRC, Shadis called Pelton's remark "premature" but in Friday's correspondence wrote that he had been "overly generous" in that assessment.

Referring to a Vermont Yankee and NRC "integrated inspection report," Shadis pointed out that there was some question about the location of the two fuel segments as early as March 26.

The report reads: "Although Entergy personnel believed they saw some indication that the fuel rod segments were in the container, the indication was not of sufficient detail and clarity to definitively conclude that the two fuel rod segments were in the container."

It goes on to say that a more detailed inspection will take place during the upcoming fuel outage but until then remained an "unresolved item."

The segments were in fact discovered missing in the midst of the fuel outage, on April 20 and the public announcement made the following day.

Neil Sheehan, NRC spokesman for Region one, said that Pelton's assertion on March 31 was "made in good faith," as the process of examining the spent fuel pool was still under way.

"He was in no way trying to be misleading," said Sheehan.

In addition to the use of the term "independent safety assessment" and claims about Vermont Yankee's spent fuel inventory, Shadis accuses Mindy Landau, assistant for communications at the NRC office of the executive director of for operations, of making misleading statements regarding the hours dedicated to the extended power uprate review process.

In a March 18 e-mail, Shadis asked Landau how much time the Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards spends reviewing extended power uprate applications.

In response, Landau wrote, on March 24, that "the number of ACRS person/hours worked reviewing some typical extended power uprates ranges from about 300-450 hours."

When Shadis requested a breakdown of the hours, Landau wrote that the "previous e-mail response to your inquiry was not intended to be a definitive answer about the adequacy of the VY uprate application or the staff review."

Landau went on to say that a combined total of 300 to 400 hours were spent reviewing all the extended power uprate applications at Dresden nuclear power stations two and three and Quad Cities one and two, significantly less than originally stated.

In his letter, Shadis said that he and "others in the public advocacy sector, feel that agency members have lied to us repeatedly and that, generally, we can no longer trust or recommend trust of your agency's representations."

Sheehan said he had not read the letter, which was sent by fax late Friday afternoon, so could not comment on its specific allegations.

He did say, however, that the agency has worked diligently to respond to public concerns regarding Vermont Yankee's uprate.

"The NRC has gone out of its way to be as open and as forthright as possible about our dealings with Vermont Yankee," said Sheehan.

As evidence of the commission's responsiveness, Sheehan pointed out the recent addition of a page at the agency's Web site dedicated solely to answering questions about the Vernon plant.

The coalition's letter closes with a request that Diaz and Merrifield "examine what it is within NRC agency culture that seems to encourage so many, when confronted with public inquiry or controversy, to substitute expediency for stewardship of agency integrity and public trust."

Brattleboro Reformer, Saturday, May 16, 2004(Front page, above fold)

Activists express frustration toward federal regulator

By CAROLYN LORIE
Reformer Staff

BRATTLEBORO -- "Mr. Shadis has documented the kind of deceptive and manipulative practices that have caused the public to lose trust in the Nuclear Regulatory Commission," said Peter Alexander,

executive director of the New England Coalition.

The comment was in reference to a letter sent on Friday by Raymond Shadis, technical advisor for the coalition, to the NRC, alleging that agency representatives had attempted to "mislead the public through obfuscation or outright false statement."

For area activists, the letter captures the deep frustration and mistrust many feel towards the federal regulator.

"The NRC has continually taken the side of the nuclear industry. It doesn't look out for the public interest. It gets funding from the industry and it supports all the industry positions," said Ed Anthes of Nuclear Free Vermont.

Anthes said he was especially concerned about a proposed rule at the NRC, making public hearings optional and much harder to secure. The rule is being fought in court by the Citizen's Awareness Network.

According to many familiar with the NRC, the agency has a history of resisting public input.

"The NRC doesn't like to concede to anybody from the outside," said David Lochbaum, in an earlier interview.

Lochbaum is a nuclear engineer who became a whistleblower in 1992 and is now a member of the Union of Concerned Scientists. He served as an expert witness for the coalition in the "uprate" case before the Public Service Board.

According to Lochbaum, there has been some improvement. Public meetings now allow for public comment, where previously it was difficult to have any interaction with NRC staff.

"When the meeting was over, if you beat the NRC person to the door, you could ask a question," said Lochbaum. Otherwise, public questions went unanswered.

For many the improvements have not gone far enough.

Local activist Gary Sachs, said that the incident of the missing fuel rods are a good example of the NRC's "manipulation."

Sachs and Anthes were among the 500 people who attended the March meeting in Vernon, where the public's frustration with the NRC was palpable.

Citizen Awareness Network member Derrik Jordan said that many meetings with the commission only serve to further confuse the public.

"Generally I have no idea what they're talking about," said Jordan. "They speak in their own language. They really don't want citizen input."

NRC spokesman David McIntyre disputes that claim.

"The agency does take very seriously its goal to be open and transparent to the public," said McIntyre in a previous interview.

Rutland Herald, Sunday, May 16, 2004(Front page, w/photo, above fold)

The 10,000-year choice

Nuclear waste site plagued by groundwater issues, political fallout

By SUSAN SMALLHEER Staff Writer

YUCCA MOUNTAIN, Nev. - The bus slowed to a stop about a mile from the proposed site of the Department of Energy's high-level radioactive waste site in the middle of a vast, mountainous desert heavily dotted with blooming sagebrush and creosote plants.

Unusual spring rains have made the desert unusually green, and yellow marguerite daisies bloom by the side of the road. Not Vermont leaf-green, but a delicate, dry sage green.

It's a cool day for the Nevada desert, windy and in the 70s, jacket weather. A few days earlier, the region had endured a week of 100-degree weather.

Michael D. Voegele, senior technical adviser for the DOE's subcontractor, Bechtel SAIC Co., drew everyone's attention to the small holes dug into the nearby sandy cliff.

Packrat middens, he pointed out, are playing a key role in the research of the high technology radioactive waste site. These bushy-tailed wood rats are commonly called desert packrats.

The DOE and the Los Alamos National Laboratory are studying packrats to determine whether it would be safe to store nuclear waste that will remain dangerous for 10,000 years, he said.

The packrats, he said, are "lousy housekeepers" - they defecate where they live and sleep.

Lucky for researchers, he said, packrat urine - believe it or not - is the perfect preservative. Middens encased in 50,000 years of prehistoric packrat urine are being studied to help determine whether Yucca Mountain can safely store radioactive waste.

It is the desert materials that the ancient packrats hauled back into their little caves that can help determine the age of water, which, in turn, can tell experts how fast water moves in the volcanic tuff rock that is predominant in the area. It was the basaltic tuff rock that drew scientists to the Yucca Mountain site in the first place.

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Voegele was the tour guide last week for a group of Vermonters, who at the invitation of Entergy Nuclear and the Nuclear Energy Institute, an industry trade group, and the DOE, got a firsthand look at the proposed high-level radioactive waste site. The group included a large contingent of business leaders from Brattleboro and southern Vermont, a few reporters, and Entergy Nuclear staff, consultants and attorneys.

Yucca Mountain is where those two missing fuel rods from the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant in Vernon, Vt., should end up for the next 10,000 years - if they are ever found - along with the other 156,000 fuel rods currently stored in Vermont Yankee's spent fuel storage area. They would be joined by the old fuel from the country's more than 100 commercial nuclear reactors.

Scientists said the key to Yucca Mountain's suitability to store waste for 10,000 years hinges on whether groundwater moves through the mountain; whether the rock is prone to fractures which would let the water move to the waste canisters stored 1,000 feet below the desert and whether it is vulnerable to volcanic activity.

While volcanic activity is millions of years ago, several old - very old - volcanic cones are plainly visible on the desert plain surrounding Yucca Mountain.

In Voegele's mind, Yucca Mountain is perfect for permanent storage of the highly radioactive waste: extremely arid with rainfall only about six inches a year, layers of impermeable rock and slow moving groundwater far below the surface of the desert and a stable environment. Volcanic activity ceased

11 million to 14 million years ago.

Voegele points to another example of low-tech proof that has been confirmed by high-tech science: a spill of distinctive dark red-stained rocks. Those rocks are covered by what he calls "desert varnish," a deposit from thousands of years of exposure to desert sun and wind.

If they had been disturbed by earth movement, he said, as he picked up a rock and flipped it over, it wouldn't have the distinctive dark coating.

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Voegele works for the DOE's contractor, Bechtel, and has lived in Nevada for more than 20 years, which makes him a rarity in Nevada and the Las Vegas region, which is one of the fastest growing areas in the entire country.

More than 32,000 new homes were built in the Las Vegas area last year, according to Census statistics. People are eager for the warm climate, low taxes, and abundant job opportunities in not just the gambling industry, but high tech, said Paul Seidler, who is a consultant on the Yucca Mountain Project.

Yucca Mountain sits about 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas, and the 180 people who work on the Yucca Mountain Characterization Project, commute daily from the city. The mountain, elevation 4,950 feet, is on the edge of the Department of Defense's Nevada test site and the surrounding Nellis Air Force Bombing and Gunnery Range. The closest inhabited town, Amargosa Valley, is 20 miles away from the crest of Yucca Mountain.

The five-mile-long tunnel, which will ultimately hold the nuclear waste currently stored at 100 different reactors across the country, has already been drilled through the innards of the mountain in a giant C shape. Studies can determine the age of water in the rocks under the mountain, and what effects the heat released by the decaying nuclear fuel will have on the surrounding rock and groundwater.

Yucca Mountain is the focus of fierce national debate from Nevada to the halls of Congress to the small state of Vermont. Nevada's Republican governor opposes the construction of the Yucca Mountain site, as do its two Democratic U.S. senators.

In the 1980s, in what is now called the "Screw Nevada Bill," the DOE narrowed its focus on Yucca Mountain in Nye County, rejecting sites in Texas and Washington state.

In 2002, Congress overrode the state of Nevada's veto of the project, the last big political fight of what promises to be an ongoing battle, as Nevada is continuing to fight the project on a variety of fronts.

Just last week, a congressional committee slashed next year's recommended funding for the Yucca Mountain Project, from the \$880 million proposed by the Bush administration, down to \$130 million, which would bring work to a standstill, according to Allen Benson, DOE spokesman. So far, about \$5.5 billion has been spent on the project, a combination of government subsidy and nuclear power customer contributions.

Vermont Yankee's customers, about half of which are Vermonters, have contributed about \$236 million since 1980 through their utility bills, toward the research and construction of Yucca Mountain.

Getting inside the U.S. government's Nevada Test Site takes some doing. The 150,000-acre Yucca Mountain is part of the gigantic test site, and not just anyone can drive there and visit the mountain.

Security is tight. Visitors must register in advance in Las Vegas, and then go through another checkpoint a dozen miles away in the town of Mercury, Nev., at one of the entrances to the Nevada test site, a popular site for anti-nuclear demonstrations.

The actor Martin Sheen, President Bartlet on TV's "West Wing," was arrested at Mercury last year for protesting at the Nevada Test Site, said Karen Threlkeld, a spokeswoman with Bechtel's Yucca Mountain Project. He arrived in a limousine and left in a limousine after his arrest, she said. There are two chain-link holding pens for the demonstrators, with a single Porta-Potty in the middle of each shadeless area.

Wackenhut Corp. guards check visitors' Yucca Mountain badges closely and look for cameras and cell phones with picture-taking capacity.

Just cover them up, Voegele tells the Vermont visitors as the bus approaches the guarded entrance. The Vermonters are later encouraged to freely take pictures of what they are allowed to see.

After driving over narrow paved roads for about a half hour, past other government experiments but none classified, visitors arrive at Yucca Mountain.

The project site looks anonymous, with white industrial metal buildings and white shiny pickup trucks, and a large storage building that could be mistaken for a small town hockey stadium.

It could be anything, except for the 25-foot in diameter tunnel opening cut into the barren mountainside.

After a briefing about safety and the history of the site, visitors are given hard hats and safety goggles for the quick, short trip into the tunnel and two alcoves drilled off to the side. Two groups of Nevada high school students are also on today's visit, and later in the day, a group of Nevada state legislators.

Dick Kovach, a field test manager from Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico who has worked on Yucca Mountain for the past 11 years, has a large red Mag-Lite flashlight tucked at his hip.

He explains the actual excavation, the technology and the tests that are under way to determine whether the site is safe for long-term disposal.

Sometimes the giant tunnel boring machine penetrated only an inch a day, hitting very hard rock; sometimes it drilled out 600 feet in a week.

"Fifty feet a shift was pretty good, but sometimes we'd only make inches," he said.

Kovach said one of the side alcoves was heated to 400 degrees continuously from 1997 to 2002, and sealed, and the high temperatures drove back the groundwater 36 feet. Since being turned off for two years, the surrounding rock has only cooled to 160 degrees, he said.

The projections mean that after Yucca Mountain is filled with nuclear fuel and sealed, it would be 1,500 years before the rock is back below the boiling point of water, Kovach said.

Threlkeld said that tours of the Yucca Mountain have been cut this year because of staffing cutbacks. The Vermont group will go no further than 200 meters into the tunnel. Previous visitors were taken about a mile into the tunnel on a special train to see the site of the deep rock heat experiment.

Kovach explains how the rock bolts are used to reinforce the tunnel and the drilling process, and then the tour is over. The group is led back to one of the white metal buildings for a box lunch and an opportunity to buy Yucca Mountain T-shirts, baseball hats, tote bags and even refrigerator magnets. The profits go to help needy families in Nye County at Christmas, a Bechtel employee says.

After lunch, Voegele takes the group of 18 Vermonters to the top of Yucca Mountain in vans, over rocky and very bumpy dirt roads.

At 4,950 feet, the vista is panoramic, breathtaking, broad and brown: Mountains stretch to the west and east, the north and south. There is not a single house or building in sight, only whitish roads cut the view.

In the distance, 75 miles away, are the Sierra Nevadas. Closer by, a gold mine, abandoned just a few years ago when the price of gold plummeted, is cut into a nearby mountain owned by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. About 1,000 feet below is the Yucca Mountain tunnel.

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Back in Vermont, Brian Cosgrove, a spokesman for Entergy Nuclear, said that under federal law, the DOE is responsible for taking all of the spent fuel from Vermont Yankee and disposing of it.

"Where they put it, that's up to them, they are responsible for it," Cosgrove said.

Yucca Mountain, as currently proposed doesn't have enough storage capacity to take all of the country's spent fuel, including all of Vermont Yankee's, but Cosgrove said that was a matter of licensing and not the physical limitations of the facility.

Since the DOE is far behind schedule on opening Yucca Mountain, Vermont Yankee is running out of storage space, a problem that will only be made worse by the proposed power increase, or "uprate."

Entergy Nuclear will be seeking state approval to build a facility at its Vernon site to store the waste in five or six concrete and steel casks, which would be air-cooled, rather than kept in water.

"We will be filing at some point this year," Cosgrove said.

Arjun Makhijani, of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research in Tacoma Park, Md., said that Yucca Mountain is the "worst possible site."

Makhijani, an engineer who has studied nuclear issues extensively, said he supports geologic disposal, but he said the rock at Yucca Mountain is volcanic, porous and ill suited for disposal for 10,000 years.

He also said that groundwater for Amargosa Valley, a community 20 miles away, flows directly under Yucca Mountain, potentially compromising the community's water supply. Livestock graze as close as 12 miles to the facility, he said.

"We need to marry engineered barriers (casks) to rock types, and we need a decade of solid laboratory field work. People have been sensible to rebel, the sites have been announced too fast," Makhijani said.

He said he also supports the end of production of nuclear waste.

"We can't just leave it festering at 77 sites across the country," he said, referring to the number of nuclear reactor complexes that store their waste.

He said he supported on-site storage of spent nuclear fuel in hardened casks until more research is done to find a better disposal or storage site.

His nonprofit organization is funded by a variety of foundations, and with a staff of seven, does research on a variety of environmental and energy issues. He works closely with the Union of Concerned Scientists, another national group that has raised questions about Yucca Mountain.

"My conclusion is that Yucca is the worst single site that has been proposed. It does not meet any of the criteria," he said.

Alfalfa that is grown on soil fed by groundwater underneath Yucca Mountain is exported all over the country, he said.

And he said that safe drinking water standards had been changed by federal regulators three different times to accommodate Yucca Mountain.

"That tells you something," he said.

Makhijani said that Yucca Mountain is a "unique mountain ... fiendishly difficult to characterize" from a scientific point of view.

The National Academy of Science published a study that said a good site would be in sedimentary granite, within 30 miles of downtown Washington, D.C., and the White House, he said. But because of politics, the study was ignored, he said.

"There are lots of places where Mother Nature safely stores radioactive materials, but Yucca Mountain is not one of them," he said.

David O'Brien, the commissioner of the Vermont Department of Public Service, had originally planned on going on the trip but had to cancel because the 2004 Legislature was still in session.

"We want to see Yucca Mountain happen," O'Brien said.

"From the state's perspective, the real quandary we're in is not having a federal solution for spent fuel. These spent fuel pools were not designed or intended to be a permanent storage site."

O'Brien said temporary storage of spent nuclear fuel is going to be expanded at Vermont Yankee.

"It's going to happen sooner or later. We are eager to see a solution for long-term storage," O'Brien said.

Entergy Nuclear will run out of storage space at Vermont Yankee in 2008 or 2007, depending on whether it gets federal approval to increase power production by 20 percent. O'Brien said that included saving space in the spent fuel pool for all the fuel in the reactor at any given time, or a "full core off-load."

Some nuclear critics maintain that space for a full core off-load is not needed, and giving Entergy approval to store fuel in dry casks outside the plant gives the plant a leg up in any future license extension.

O'Brien said he wants Entergy Nuclear to maintain the space not because of safety concerns - "you can always flood the core" - but because of access to the plant's decommissioning trust fund. Unless all the fuel is out of the reactor, Entergy can't use the funds.

Raymond Shadis, senior technical adviser for the anti-nuclear New England Coalition, visited Yucca Mountain three years ago.

He said he went on an engineering tour of the site with international experts on high-level waste management, and he said that the international scientific community is far from united on the issue.

"I don't know that there is any safe place. I don't think there is a ready solution. Perhaps deep, deep, deep geologically, a mile or two deep," Shadis suggested, instead of the existing 1,000-foot-deep tunnels at Yucca Mountain.

Shadis said the nuclear fission process could be altered to produce less dangerous and shorter-lived nuclear waste, but it would be more costly to nuclear power companies.

"What's at issue here is keeping an industry profitable," Shadis said. "We like to say 'You can have cheap nuclear power or safe nuclear power, but you can't have cheap and safe nuclear power.'"

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Brattleboro Reformer, Saturday, May 15, 2004(Op-Ed, page 5, above fold)

Vermonters 'should be asking why the Department of Public Service and the State Nuclear Engineer, vehemently opposed any suggestion for an Independent Safety Assessment, and only changed their tune after the Public Service Board ordered the much smaller engineering assessment.'

The public must stay engaged with VY

PETER ALEXANDER

During the past few months, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and Entergy Nuclear Vermont Yankee have been exposed for an embarrassing and dangerous series of mistakes and oversights that caused Vermont's political leadership to lose confidence in both the company and its regulators in Washington. There is good reason for the breakdown in trust. At a public meeting in Vernon on March 31, an NRC inspector gave solid reassurance that all of Vermont Yankee's spent fuel was accounted for. Three weeks later, the same inspector broke the news that two fuel rod segments were, in fact, missing. This came on the heels of the announcement that cracks had been discovered in Vermont Yankee's steam dryer - the very part of the reactor shown most likely to fail under the extreme conditions of an extended power uprate. Reassurances by Entergy's lobbyists, PR men, and top managers did not help. In the face of mounting calls for an Independent Safety Assessment the NRC finally caved in. On May 5, the agency announced that it will conduct an engineering assessment prior to granting approval for Entergy's request to boost nuclear power at Vermont Yankee to 120 percent of original design and licensed capacity.

Raymond Shadis, staff technical advisor to New England Coalition, characterized the NRC's belated decision as "One giant step for NRC; one small step for Vermont-kind." It is too early to know if the assessment that the NRC has in mind will be a meaningful and useful one. But there are many indications for concern. The inspection will comprise some 700 hours of engineering time spent examining the plant and its records. By contrast, the Independent Safety Assessment conducted at Maine Yankee in 1996 comprised at least 4,000 hours on site, plus several thousand additional hours spent examining documents.

The timing of the NRC's announcement was also unfortunate: One day after, refueling at Vermont Yankee was completed and the reactor up and running again. Unless the NRC is now willing to order a temporary shutdown at Vermont Yankee, critical internal systems in the reactor primary containment cannot be physically inspected until the next refueling outage. That won't be until the fall of 2005, well past time for an expected NRC decision on the extended power uprate. Further, instead of being independent as requested by citizens and government officials from Vermont, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, the NRC's proposed assessment offers no assurance of independence. There is no indication, for example, that the process will be open and transparent, or that it will be subject to state and citizen oversight and review. Without these safeguards, any assessment by the NRC will be highly suspect, especially with the agency's credibility now at such a low ebb.

Entergy's credibility is even lower. The company's recent stealth attempt to avoid legislative oversight of their upcoming application for dry cask storage was a revealing look at how the Louisiana-based, multi-billion dollar energy giant does its business. Even the company's official statements are often riddled with deceptions. For example, a recent Entergy Op Ed piece published in numerous New England papers claimed that Vermont Yankee operates without generating any greenhouse gases. This is simply not true, for it ignores the massive amount of toxic pollution and greenhouse gases

created in the nuclear fuel cycle: the mining, transporting, refining, processing, storing, and guarding of uranium and its deadly by-products.

Such deceptions are routine for this company, but occasionally they backfire. In October 2003, the Vermont Public Service Board sanctioned Entergy for its deceptive behavior and chastised the company for the kind of corrosive and bullying attitude that threatens an otherwise fair and open process. The public is well-advised to maintain vigilance and to regard with a healthy dose of suspicion any claims by either Entergy or the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. For example, the company's current extended power uprate application should not be regarded as independent of other important issues, as Entergy would have us believe. In the pipeline, and coming in rapid succession, are Entergy's applications for dry cask storage and license extension. The nuclear onslaught in Vermont has just begun.

Unfortunately, Vermonters are not likely to get much help from the agencies that are supposed to be their advocates against Entergy's profit-taking plans for the antique reactor in Vernon. The public should be asking why the Department of Public Service and the State Nuclear Engineer vehemently opposed any suggestion for an Independent Safety Assessment, and only changed their tune after the Public Service Board ordered the much smaller engineering assessment. Members of Vermont's Congressional Delegation, on the other hand, have proven themselves strong and reliable advocates for the safety of their constituents. Vermont's Congressman and two Senators should be thanked and recognized for the significant pressure they brought to bear on the NRC in recent months. Vermonters should celebrate the small victory of an engineering assessment, but we should not relax our vigilance. Instead, we must renew our efforts and prepare for the costly legal, regulatory, and legislative battles looming on the near horizon. New England Coalition remains committed, as it has for 33 years, to doing the job that government agencies have so often failed to do: researching and bringing to the attention of the public and government decision-makers the true issues and risks around nuclear power, and exposing when we can the deceptions, oversights, and unsafe practices of the nuclear industry and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

No matter what, the sad truth remains: even if the aging nuclear reactor in Vernon avoids a major accident, and even if Yucca Mountain does eventually open, Entergy's and the NRC's legacy to the people of Vermont will be hundreds of tons of deadly radioactive waste sitting on a geologically unstable piece of land above the Connecticut River for as much as several hundred years.

Peter Alexander is the executive director of New England Coalition, a Brattleboro-based non-profit environmental safety advocate. The group's Web site is www.necnp.org.

The Recorder, Friday, May 14, 2004 (Page 3, above fold)

Nuke plant debris unlikely for west county landfill

Official: Waste might be better to fill in plant site

By JANET BOND

Recorder Staff

CHARLEMONT - The closed nuclear power plant in Rowe may have enough construction debris to fill a closed dump in Heath, but that debris might not be available.

The rubble from the decommissioned and deconstructed Yankee Atomic power plant might be better used to fill in the power plant site, according to a spokesman from the power plant.

Yankee officials, representatives from the Department of Public Health and the Department of Environmental Protection, selectmen from Hawley, Heath and Charlemont and at least 30 residents from the three towns met Thursday night to talk about accepting construction rubble from the power plant.

Gregory Maret, in charge of decommissioning the nuclear power plant, told the informational meeting at the Hawlemont - Regional Elementary School that things don't look good for the plant helping the towns of Hawley, Charlemont and Heath to close the landfill.

In April, the three towns asked Yankee to look into whether it had any material to help build the dome in their seven-acre landfill so it can be capped.

Maret told the selectmen at the April meeting that it didn't look promising and he essentially repeated himself Thursday night in the Hawlemont gymnasium.

The three towns operated an unlined dump on Burrington Road in Heath from 1971 to 1989, when it was closed. The landfill is leaking toxic chemicals into an area with no public water supply. All homeowners get their water from wells.

Dan Hall, from the Department of Environmental Protection, said there is a contamination plume spreading from the dump and, as a result, one private well had documented contamination by volatile organic compounds, solvents, freon and other chemicals.

"It's a great concern. There's no public water supply. The concentrations aren't that high, but they are high enough that it's a great concern," said Hall.

The DEP is requiring the landfill be capped with the hope that stopping any additional water - such as rain - from causing what is buried in the dump to leach, the spreading contamination might be stopped.

The towns, which have yet to hire an engineering firm to start the capping design process, had estimated that it might take 9,000 tons of rubble to make the dome that would be capped by an impermeable layer.

Maret said the plant did have 18 million pounds of construction rubble that could work at the site, but for several reasons the plant was coming to the conclusion that the material could better be used by the plant's own closing.

Hall told an audience concerned about radioactive contamination that material from the plant could be considered for use in the landfill closing despite the "stigma" of coming from a nuclear power plant.

Maret said the plant would continue analyzing its closing process to see if there is anything that Yankee can contribute to help the towns meet their need. The analysis is supposed to be done in July.

The Keene Sentinel, Thursday, May 13, 2004 (Region, page 4, below fold)

NRC launches new Web page

By ERIKA COHEN

Sentinel Staff

VERNON, Vt. - After months of being pelted by questions about problems at Vermont Yankee and its

application to boost power, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has a new Web page about the project, the commission announced Wednesday.

The Web page has information on the missing fuel rods, the discovery of cracks in the steam dryer, Vermont Yankee's application to boost power, general information about power uprates, questions about detailed plant inspections and numerous other details related to the plant and the uprate.

A couple of the 27 questions on the Frequently Asked Question page address cracks in the steam dryer. The steam dryer is located on top of the reactor and removes excess moisture from the steam before it leaves the reactor and goes to the turbine, which generates electricity.

In one answer, the NRC admits the exact safety role of the steam dryer is unknown. While Vermont Yankee officials told The Sentinel in March "the cracks do not impact dryer performance," the Web site suggests this might not be true.

According to the NRC posted answer, "if cracks degrade the steam dryer to the point that a part broke loose, that "loose part" could impact the operation of safety equipment," a fact reported on March 15.

In addition to Vermont Yankee's application to increase power and the Vermont Public Service Board's request for, a more detailed engineering assessment, the Web site also includes supplemental letters from the public and Vermont legislators.

Raymond G. Shadis of the New England Coalition said he was pleased the Web site had been established but felt some information was not detailed enough. The New England Coalition is a nuclear industry watchdog group that opposed the up-rate.

For instance, Shadis would like to see answers about what current regulations the plant is not in compliance with and what risks such non-compliance poses.

Shadis said the coalition asked for the Web page a few weeks ago and was told "it was already in the works." Spokesmen for the NRC were in meetings this morning and were not available for comment.

Last September, Louisiana-based Entergy Corp. which purchased Vermont Yankee in 2002 - asked the NRC for permission to increase Vermont Yankee's electrical output by 20 percent, from about 540 megawatts to about 650 megawatts,

The NRC began its review of the uprate application on Jan. 31. It should make a decision in about a year.

On the Net www.nrc.gov/reactors/plant-specific-items/vermont-yankee-is-sues.html

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