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NU: drip- drip, drip
 Hartford Courant Editorial June 23. 1996

Embattled Northeast Utilities has something in common with the Clinton White House: Both are under siege, with unflattering stories about them coming out with dismaying regularity.

And neither has been especially adept at containing the damage.

These are the latest droplets in the water torture afflicting NU: x In a critical report, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission took note of the slow erosion of part of the concrete foundation beneath the Millstone 3 nuclear power station and expressed concern about its long-term safety implications. The head of the NRC inspection team at Millstone said the erosion "is not currently a safety issue," but "it's got to be solved sooner or later."

The NRC report also said that in earlier evaluations of the problem, NU used inaccurate data to determine whether the weakened concrete could support the weight of the reactor.

NU claims this is an old story blown out of proportion. The company contends that despite the unprecedented erosion - apparently caused by a chemical reaction where two different types of concrete meet - there is a huge margin of , safety, and that the problem should not affect the utility's ability to bring the plant back on-line, perhaps later this summer. All three Millstone nuclear plants are shut down after having been put on the NRC's safety watch list.

Perhaps the erosion in Millstone 3's foundation can be fixed and will not prevent the plant's start-up. But it pays to be skeptical, considering the company's record of cutting corners on regulations and harassing employees who raise safety concerns. x On Thursday, NU and George Galatis, an employee who blew the whistle on unsafe practices at the nuclear complex at Waterford, announced they reached an "amicable settlement" under which Mr. Galatis left the company. As usual in such cases, the details of the agreement were not released.

This whistleblower's complaint about procedures for handling spent fuel rods at Millstone I is credited with forcing regulators to look deeper into the company's operational problems. His story made the cover of Time magazine.

Mr. Galatis' departure, no matter how "amicable," reminds people of NU's sorry treatment of employees who go public with safety concerns.

Paul Blanch, an engineer and whistleblower who left the company in 1993 with a settlement, said, "It's a travesty to the industry that everyone who has safety issues and brings them forth eventually is banned or bought out by the industry."

He calls it "ethic cleansing - anyone with ethics seems to be removed from the industry."

That's too extreme. But Northeast Utilities has done its share of cleansing of employees who raise safety issues. The company has even been fined for its treatment of whistleblowers.

One lesson that NU must learn from its spate of troubles is to listen to, not go to war against, employees who have such concerns.