

Sentinel Editorial

Safety first

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission revealed last week that plant security officials at the Vermont Yankee nuclear power station in Vernon, Vt., violated their own safety procedures in dealing with a possible pipe bomb found south of the cooling towers in November.

According to a report by one Vermont Yankee employee, though local police took the situation seriously enough to turn off their cellphones and radios and rec-

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ommend calling in a bomb squad, the plant's security manager and superintendent instead duct-taped a piece of string to the item, stood back, and yanked.

The report conjures images of the Three Stooges, or maybe Wile E.

Coyote holding up a sign reading: Boom!

Fortunately, the item was not a bomb, but rather a discarded pump. We'll not dwell on the question of why an unused pump was left outside on the grounds of a nuclear facility and instead be grateful that this time, the poorly handled situation proved harmless.

It does, however, serve as a reminder.

Last August, many in the region breathed a sigh of relief at the news that Entergy would shut down Vermont Yankee by the end of this year. The news was, of course, an economic blow to many. But environmentalists and those who have generally worried about a potential disaster at the plant were pleased.

This latest report calls to mind that great destructive potential. Now is not the time to loosen standards or stop paying attention. There may be a tendency to relax as the end of the plant's useful life nears, but the Vermont Yankee site will not be safe until it has been closed, decommissioned and cleared of nuclear waste.

That process will take many years. As long as nuclear material is present, the site remains a potential target and subject to an accident that could prove catastrophic.

Regarding the November incident, the NRC, the federal oversight authority, took a now familiar stand. It noted the lapse in procedure and said no one was in

danger, so the public didn't really need to be informed.

One might interpret that "no harm, no foul" attitude to mean the NRC only considers a procedural lapse to be significant if it results in actual damage.

The NRC did also note plant security, in an unrelated event, properly stopped a "furniture contractor" from entering the site after he failed a random blood-alcohol screening.

So, at least the chairs are safe.