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Anti-Vermont-Yankee crowd loud as ever

As shutdown looms, tempers flare at safety meeting

By **KYLE JARVIS**
Sentinel Staff

BRATTLEBORO — The Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant is shutting down, but that didn't stop critics Wednesday from blasting federal officials during an annual safety meeting.

Each year, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission publishes an assessment of whether the plant has operated safely over the past 12 months. As in previous years, this year's report determined that "overall, Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Station operated in a manner that

preserved public health and safety and met all cornerstone objectives."

Entergy, which owns and operates Vermont Yankee, announced in August it would close the plant later this year, due to financial issues and

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A look at residents' issues

■ They want dry cask storage, which they say is safer than the spent fuel pool storage used at Vermont Yankee.

■ They're concerned about the relationship between the nuclear

industry and the NRC, accusing federal officials of looking the other way or not addressing major safety concerns at Vermont Yankee.

■ They want to maintain and increase the

emergency evacuation zone during decommissioning of Vermont Yankee. The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's rules say the zone can be eliminated during decommissioning.

Anti-Vermont-Yankee crowd voices concerns as closure nears

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competition from the natural gas market.

The NRC's 2014 assessment did not identify any issues at the plant that exceeded code green, or very low safety significance.

But as is typically the case at the annual meeting in Brattleboro, residents were not buying it.

A few minutes into panelists' overview of the report, about a half-dozen members of the Shut It Down Affinity Group marched into the auditorium of Brattleboro Union High School. One member began reading from a prepared statement on the transfer of spent nuclear fuel before the others quickly joined her.

Spent fuel rods are often racked and kept in pools of water on-site at nuclear power plants, where the water cools the fuel over several years and acts as a shield from radiation. In dry cask storage, spent fuel rods are surrounded by gas inside steel casks, which are welded or bolted shut and surrounded by more steel or concrete.

The NRC recently voted against requiring spent nuclear fuel to be transferred from pools into dry cask storage.

The group recited from recent remarks by Sen. Edward J. Markey, D-Mass.: "Experts agree an accident at one of these pools could result in damage as bad as that caused by an accident at an operating nuclear reactor."

The group finished and the meeting calmed down — until a few minutes later when the question-and-answer session began.

Clay A. Turnbull, of the anti-nuclear New England Coalition, asked how NRC inspectors could have done their jobs thoroughly if the same issues kept coming up at Vermont Yankee, such as cables that aren't supposed to get wet that were found submerged in 2010 and again in 2011.

"How could you solve the submerged cables issue and still have conduits open that allow flooding into the

electrical switch rooms?" he asked.

Scott Rutenkroger, a senior resident inspector for the NRC, acknowledged there were "breakdowns in Entergy's process," which he and other NRC officials attribute to miscommunication between Entergy and the company it contracted with to handle the issue. The company installed the wrong type of seal plugs, allowing water to infiltrate the switch rooms, while Entergy believed the issue had been fixed, he said.

Brattleboro resident and longtime Vermont Yankee critic Gary Sachs repeatedly shouted questions and accusations at NRC officials. Meanwhile, some members of the Shut It Down Affinity Group stood silently, holding signs that read "Shut it down, clean it up," as at least two other members sat in the audience playing a laugh track every time NRC officials spoke.

There was also heavy criticism of the NRC for proposing to eliminate the emergency evacuation zone once the plant has begun

shutting down.

The evacuation zone includes a 10-mile radius around the plant, and in New Hampshire covers Chesterfield, Hinsdale, Richmond, Swanzey and Winchester.

Hattie Nestel, a member of the Shut It Down group, asked about the "lessons learned" from the Fukushima disaster in Japan, and how experts there recommended a 50-mile evacuation zone after the plant melted down in March 2011.

NRC officials explained that their rules typically do not require an evacuation zone once a plant has gone into shutdown mode, but Nestel cut them off.

"We are not fools in this town and in this community," she said. "We know you're lying, we know you're incompetent, and that you're only here because you have to be here once a year."

Bill Dean, the regional administrator for the NRC, took exception to Nestel's comments.

"I really find that very insulting," he said, to which

Nestel replied "Good!" as she walked back to her seat.

"Every one of the NRC individuals takes their role and responsibility very seriously, and do it to the utmost of our abilities," Dean continued. "I appreciate the fact of freedom of expression and speech, but I really have to take serious offense to that last comment."

But the criticism kept coming, as Lissa Weinmann of Brattleboro took the commission to task for eliminating the evacuation zone and its determination that spent fuel pools are just as safe as dry cask storage.

"Nobody here is really buying that," she said.

John A. Ward of Gill, Mass., asked panelists if they knew how many spent fuel rods the pool at Vermont Yankee was originally designed to hold. A brief delay followed as NRC officials consulted each other.

"Come on! You can do it!" Sachs taunted.

Rutenkroger finally said the number was between 500 and 600.

Ward then asked how many rods were there now,

and what ratio it had increased by.

Rutenkroger said about 3,900 spent fuel rods are in the pool now, about seven or eight times as many as the pool had originally been designed to handle, although he assured Ward that each time Entergy proposed adding more rods to the pool, they had to meet certain NRC requirements to do so.

One audience member asked if Entergy could walk away from its responsibilities altogether if it went bankrupt during the decommissioning process.

Michael Dusaniwskyj, an NRC economist, said there are so many scenarios that could surround such a

situation that he hesitated to speculate, drawing loud jeers from the crowd.

After the meeting, however, Dusaniwskyj explained that if something like that occurred, the NRC would ask a bankruptcy judge to prevent any funds set aside for decommissioning from being used to pay off Entergy's debts.

But if the company was truly broke, he said, "either the ratepayer or the taxpayer is going to have to pick it up."

■ The NRC's 2014 assessment letter is available at <http://www.nrc.gov/NRR/OVERSIGHT/ASSESS/LETTERS/vy> — 2013q4.pdf.

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