

Guest Column (3/25/10)



Closing Yankee is the right choice

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BY ELIZABETH SKARIE

Feb. 24 was a historic day. The Senate's decision to deny a 20-year license renewal for Vermont Yankee marked the first time in U.S. history that a state legislature voted to close a nuclear power plant. It has been clear for years that Entergy Louisiana cannot be trusted to safely operate Vermont Yankee past its scheduled retirement date in 2012.

In 2004, we saw a transformer fire that caused the plant to close down. The next year, a leak of radioactive tritium occurred that went unreported until this year. In 2007, a pipe 6 feet in diameter carrying water through a cooling tower broke and the tower collapsed. Shortly after that, our Department of Health reported that 30 percent more radiation was being released from Vermont Yankee after the company decided to increase power output. This year, we've seen leaks of tritium into the groundwater surrounding the plant that are 38 times the federal drinking water standards.

During this time, Entergy Louisiana has been doing everything it can to stick Vermonters with the cost of cleaning up after their blunders. The company is working to spin off Yankee and five other aging reactors into a separate company called Enexus that would be \$3.5 billion in debt from the start. The decommissioning fund to clean up the reactor site is over \$600 million short of what industry experts predict it will cost to clean up what is quickly becoming a radioactive waste dump down in Vernon.

In the days since the historic vote to close Vermont Yankee, we've heard the usual defenders of Entergy call the Senate's action a mistake. Mike Benevento's recent Observer column on March 11 serves as a good example of the scare tactics that have been employed to make it seem like we have no other option but nuclear power. The bulk of Benevento's argument comes from John McLaughry, the vice president of what Mike calls the "nonpartisan" Ethan Allen Institute. For those who aren't familiar with EAI, it receives funding from the Cato Institute, a national free-market think tank that denies the existence of global warming and takes money from ExxonMobil.

Benevento and McLaughry paint a grim picture of our state without Vermont Yankee with job losses, rising electric bills, inconsistent power sources and a dependency on coal or a new nuclear plant. Fortunately, none of what they say is true.

> Vermont Yankee employs only 218 Vermonters. According to Ken Picard's column in Seven Days on March 10, when Maine Yankee was decommissioned, as many as 430 workers were employed through the eight-year process to clean up the reactor site. Other benefits for the county after decommissioning were "strength in the real estate market, more new home construction and increases in the average price of a home sold."

> In December, Entergy offered a new contract to Vermont's utilities for half the power that we now get from Vermont Yankee at a 50 percent price hike. The price would rise by 3 percent every year after 2012, and the state would only receive one-tenth of its power from Vermont Yankee.

> Vermont Yankee accounts for only 2 percent of the electricity on the New England grid, and currently there is a huge surplus of power out there. Most of the electricity generation in New England comes from natural gas, a relatively clean power source. The Department of Public Service estimated in 2007 that efficiency alone could replace the output from Vermont Yankee, and our utilities have already found alternatives, including a wind farm in New Hampshire.

I want to personally praise the leadership of Senate President Peter Shumlin, as well as each of the other 26 senators that voted against the continued operation of Vermont Yankee. These legislators were able to step past the scare tactics that Entergy and the Ethan Allen Institute have used. With recent polling showing that two-thirds of Vermonters support Yankee's closure, the Senate's decision was mandated by the people, and the House should follow suit. I look forward to the day when we have localized and sustainable energy sources in Vermont, and no longer have to think about Entergy and Vermont Yankee.

Elizabeth Skarie is a Williston resident.

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