



NRC NEWS

U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

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No. I-10-022

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April 19, 2010

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NRC UPDATES PUBLIC ON VERMONT YANKEE GROUNDWATER CONTAMINATION

BRATTLEBORO, VT – Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials say that while the groundwater contamination at the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant in Vernon, Vt., has had no impact on public health and safety, the agency is working aggressively to address the issue.

“The NRC has significantly increased its inspection oversight at the site to ensure the plant owner, Entergy, identifies the source of contamination, stops the leak into the groundwater and takes aggressive steps to prevent recurrence,” said NRC Deputy Executive Director Bruce Mallett. “I want to assure the public that radioactive material in soil and groundwater wells at the Vermont Yankee site is unacceptable and we are taking action to see that the licensee promptly corrects this situation.”

“This is an important issue to residents around the plant and surrounding communities. It is important to the NRC as well,” said NRC Region I Administrator Samuel J. Collins, in remarks prepared for an evening meeting at Brattleboro Union High School. “We have monitored the plant owner’s efforts to find and fix the problem,” he said, adding that the agency planned the Monday meeting to discuss its actions with members of the community surrounding Vermont Yankee.

Agency officials scheduled an open house Monday afternoon to meet informally with members of the public and elected officials to discuss the groundwater contamination issue at Vermont Yankee. A more formal meeting with the public and elected officials was set for Monday evening in the school auditorium.

On Jan. 7, Entergy notified the NRC it had identified tritium in a groundwater monitoring well at Vermont Yankee. Entergy established an evaluation team to attempt to locate the source of the tritium and developed enhanced sampling plans. To date, only shallow groundwater monitoring wells have shown detectable levels of tritium. No detectable tritium levels were found in any drinking water well samples at the Vermont Yankee site or in the Connecticut River.

Subsequently, in March, Entergy determined that the groundwater contamination was the result of leakage from an underground concrete pipe vault and a connected drain line associated with the Advanced Off-Gas (AOG) system, which enclosed some leaking piping containing radioactive materials. While Entergy has examined and evaluated other potential sources, the evidence to date indicates that the AOG pipe vault area is the source of the groundwater contamination. Entergy has stopped the leakage from this location and started repairing the degraded piping. Workers have also begun to remove contaminated soil in the immediate area of the leak, and to extract contaminated groundwater from the affected area. Entergy plans to process and recycle the extracted groundwater for use in the reactor facility.

The NRC continues to closely monitor and assess Entergy's investigation, conclusions, and remedial actions to resolve this condition. The NRC will continue to verify that the plant meets the rigid standards set by federal authorities.

"We have been focusing our resources on following up on this issue since January. Both NRC Resident Inspectors and radiation specialists have been at the site monitoring and evaluating Entergy's efforts to resolve this issue and take appropriate corrective measures," said Collins. "NRC inspectors will also evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of Entergy's long-term monitoring program for detecting, assessing and monitoring the contaminated groundwater."

"We recognize that any discharge of radioactivity from a plant, regardless of the source and regardless of the level, can raise concerns. That's why we wanted to talk with area residents to explain face-to-face what we are doing," Collins added.

On a broader scale, the NRC has created a groundwater contamination task force to examine the work the NRC has done to date on this issue and determine if there are additional steps that can be taken. Mallett said, "The agency will host a public workshop tomorrow (April 20) at the agency headquarters in Rockville, Md., to hear from a variety of government, industry, academic and public experts about whether NRC policies on groundwater contamination at nuclear plants need modification."

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