

**Brattleboro Reformer -- May 6, 2017**

## **Vermont Yankee: Expert says faster reuse unrealistic amid national waste dilemma**

**By Lissa Weinmann, Special to the Reformer**

BRATTLEBORO — Hopes for an expedited decommissioning and eventual reuse of the shuttered Vermont Yankee nuclear reactor are unrealistic and potentially misplaced, according to a radioactive waste policy expert and activists who will visit Brattleboro for a community discussion on "Nuclear Waste: The Road from Vermont Yankee to Texas" on Saturday, May 6, from 4:30 to 6 pm at the community room at the Brattleboro Food Co-op.

The presentation comes as federal and state authorities consider the sale of the plant to NorthStar Industries Inc., which has touted a faster decommissioning at a lower price than Entergy had planned.

Kevin Kamps, Radioactive Waste Watchdog for Maryland-based Beyond Nuclear, who has studied nuclear waste issues in the U.S. and globally for 25 years and is to be featured at the event, said he expects decommissioning will be hampered by deeper levels of radioactive contamination and reuse delayed by the continued presence of high level nuclear waste in dry cask storage on the Yankee site for many decades to come.

Kamps' warning of a long wait amid hot controversy was underscored by testimony at an April 26 House Energy and Commerce Committee hearing on the draft Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act, which would break with current law to allow private companies like Waste Control Specialists, a Texas-based partner in the proposed Yankee sale, to build consolidated interim storage facilities to accept waste from the power plant site before a permanent deep geologic repository that could best contain lethal material for hundreds of thousands of years is available.

The new bill also revives the Reagan-era identification of Yucca Mountain, in Nevada, as the sole place for such waste despite technical and political hurdles (including opposition from the state of Nevada and violation of a U.S. treaty with the Shoshone peoples) that led the Department of Energy, the public entity charged by law to build the repository, to deem the site "unworkable" in 2009. That was after \$14 billion of the Nuclear Waste Fund earmarked for that purpose was expended on the site and before the Nuclear Regulatory Commission finished its final assessment of viability. The DOE then embarked on a new plan for "consent based" waste storage at a central repository as yet to be identified as well as 'interim sites' where communities could receive financial compensation for agreeing to host the nation's nuclear waste.

The Trump Administration's congressional budget request in March 2017 includes "\$120 million to restart licensing activities for the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository and initiate a robust interim storage program." The nuclear industry in 2014 stopped paying a fee on nuclear energy

generation to build a central repository; That \$46 billion Nuclear Waste Fund falls far short of the "trillions" the DOE anticipates will be required to fund the facility.

WCS applied to the NRC in April 2016 for a license to construct and operate a centralized interim storage site adjacent to its lower-level radioactive dump (where thousands of tons of concrete and other waste from the Vernon site will be transported) in Andrews, Texas, stipulating that the DOE must bear sole and full liability for the waste even though, under current law, liability and title remain with the generators until the waste is taken away to an operating repository.

But the effort to quickly clean up the Vernon site was dealt a significant blow when Rod Baltzer, Waste Control Specialists president and chief executive officer, wrote a letter asking the NRC to "temporarily suspend" its review of the company's application for a high-level waste dump. Baltzer cited a "magnitude of financial burdens." The cost of the NRC review now is estimated at \$7.5 million, "which is significantly higher than we originally anticipated," he wrote.

"The bottom line for this push to interim storage is that nuclear companies want to reduce their liability for this highly problematic waste product as quickly as possible," said Kamps. "Republican leaders in Congress and the nuclear companies who contribute to them want to weaken the law to allow privately owned de facto permanent parking lot dumps in Texas and New Mexico where liability for any problems is transferred to the U.S. taxpayer."

The Vermont federal delegation and the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Decommissioning Citizens Advisory Panel support the concept of interim storage in Texas or wherever it could be approved. Almost everyone who spoke at an April 2017 Public Service Board hearing about the NorthStar sale supported the idea of getting rid of the casks as soon as possible in order to expedite redevelopment of the site.

Others say the waste should be kept in Vermont until a permanent solution is found. Kamps, Rose Gardner, a business owner and Sierra Club activist who lives near the Texas facilities and Deb Katz, Executive Director of the local Citizens Awareness Network who spearheaded citizen involvement with Yankee Rowe and other reactor decommissionings will explain why they, the Union of Concerned Scientists, Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council and other experts believe hardened on site safe storage, or HOSS, at the Yankee site is a safer, more economical and socially just plan.

"UCS has yet to see an analysis demonstrating that the benefits of interim storage clearly outweigh the additional costs and risks associated with siting and licensing new storage facilities and the extra transportation that would be required," Dr. Edwin Lyman, Senior Scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists — a group that is not against nuclear power — testified to Congress, adding that interim sites raise the potential of terrorists getting bomb-making material. "The U.S. can afford to allow the NRC to take its time in reviewing the safety of Yucca Mountain and for the DOE to locate and

characterize other possible repository sites. Provided that nuclear plants thin out their high-density spent fuel pools by expediting transfer to dry casks, and other necessary upgrades are carried out, spent fuel can be stored safely and securely at reactor sites for many decades. There is no urgent need to rush forward with a less-than-optimal approach for the long term."

"Transporting waste is the weakest link of a nonsensical interim plan that has nothing to do with finding a permanent repository," Kamps said. "It plays musical chairs with deadly waste on US highways and rail lines, exposing millions of people to addition risk for no good reason."

Advocates of interim storage say radioactive materials are transported all the time without incident, but Kamps said incidents do occur and that NorthStar partner Areva had acknowledged 'numerous violations of surface contamination many hundreds of times above the allowable limits' when transporting waste in France.

"CAN advocates for hardened on site storage to protect reactor communities until there is a scientifically sound and environmentally just solution for this toxic waste," Katz said. "The communities targeted for nuclear waste are routinely rural, low income people of color and Native Americans. It is terrible to put people in the position of having to choose between short term economic survival and long term health and safety. Reactor and targeted communities need to work together to advocate for solutions that do the least harm."

Reactor communities that have become de facto interim storage locations for toxic nuclear waste may be able to secure their own federal funding for storing the waste until a permanent repository is found. Congressman Welch cosponsored bipartisan HR 5632, the Stranded Nuclear Waste Accountability Act of 2016 which would initially allot Vermont about \$10 million from the Nuclear Waste Fund under a formula comparable to that being contemplated for places like Andrews, Texas.

Kamps says there is a reason that Entergy estimated \$1.2 billion cleanup and NorthStar is estimating it will take less than half of that. "I have no doubt that the site is massively contaminated. We don't know how long the underground pipes Entergy lied about having were leaking radioactive particles into the ground."

Katz agreed. "NorthStar will find a much larger problem as all nuclear decommissionings have, but on a fixed contract, it will devise every trick in the book to limit cleanup," so the public must remain vigilant, Katz said. "With Yankee Rowe and Connecticut Yankee, we had to bring documents to the state to show them that Yankee was putting the test wells exactly where the contamination wasn't."

Rose Gardener, the activist who lives near WCS' current and proposed Texas dumps, hopes Vermonters eager to send the radioactive waste generated here to her community will come to the Saturday event to learn more. She thinks that while the Texas legislature approved plans for the nuclear waste dumps and the DOE may call Texas a "consent-based site," groundwater concerns are

still an issue and that people should know how Energy Secretary Rick Perry's historic ties to WCS may influence his decisions as the new head of DOE and key decision-maker on U.S. nuclear waste policy moving forward.

Lissa Weinmann is a Senior Fellow at the World Policy Institute in New York who lives and owns a business in Brattleboro. She can be contacted at [lrweinmann@gmail.com](mailto:lrweinmann@gmail.com).