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NRC FINDS VIOLATIONS OF LOW SAFETY SIGNIFICANCE AT VERMONT YANKEE NUCLEAR POWER PLANT

During a special engineering inspection at Vermont Yankee, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) found eight violations of very low safety significance, all of which must be addressed by the plant operator, Entergy.

In remarks prepared for delivery at an evening meeting of the Vermont State Nuclear Advisory Panel (V-SNAP), NRC official Wayne Lanning noted that the eight findings in the special inspection would not affect plant safety.

Lanning also rebutted claims by critics of the inspection that hundreds of violations would be found if a broader inspection were undertaken. The NRC examination looked at key safety systems in the plant, with the Vermont State Engineer observing.

And the NRC official reported to the panel on an earlier inspection that examined how two pieces of spent nuclear fuel were missing but were later found.

"Both teams found problems and issues, and because we insist on stringent safety standards, these problems must be corrected," said Lanning, director of the Reactor Safety Division in the NRC's Region I office in King of Prussia, Pa.

Speaking of the eight findings in the roughly 1,000-hour hands-on inspection, Lanning said they were "very important because the utility should have identified and corrected them, particularly the ones related to the power uprate. Vermont Yankee must now ascertain why they did not identify the problem, evaluate the reason for the problem, correct it, and then determine if a similar issue exists elsewhere in the plant."

Vermont Yankee's owner, Entergy, has asked the NRC to permit it to increase the power output of the plant by 20 percent, to 1,912 megawatts thermal. The NRC expects to decide on the request sometime next year, and the special inspection was conducted in response to a request from Vermont's Public Service Board for an independent engineering assessment.

Lanning said this effort was "not an inspection to determine whether the NRC should approve Entergy's power uprate application." He described it as "a comprehensive evaluation of the most risk-significant components and systems in the plant and, when taken in combination with other NRC evaluations, helped determine that sufficient margin exists in the design and operation of the Vermont Yankee facility to ensure public health and safety."

In challenging claims that a broader inspection would turn up significantly more violations at the 30-year-old plant, Lanning said, "I do not agree with that. Our experience shows there is some correlation between the number of inspectors, the scope of the inspection and the number of areas of non-compliance that are found. But we do not believe there are hundreds of violations at Vermont Yankee waiting to be found. Even larger design inspections at troubled plants like Maine Yankee and Millstone did not turn up hundreds of violations."

The next step for the NRC is to inspect Entergy's corrective actions and there will be additional review of the application for a power uprate.

On the missing spent fuel, the NRC found that poor recordkeeping and inventories dating back to 1980 was responsible for the belief that two pieces of fuel were missing. The penalty for Entergy could result in increased NRC oversight, a violation without a fine or a violation and a fine.

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