

US Approves 20-year Extension for Vermont Nuclear Plant

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On Monday, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) delivered a letter to energy firm Entergy stating that it may keep running its Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant through March, 21, 2032. The reactor in the aged plant, which is known to have released radiation into groundwater, is virtually identical to that of the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan, whose flaws some scientists claim have contributed to the world's worst nuclear disaster since the Chernobyl meltdown.

The same day, NRC head of operations R. William Borchardt told the commission that the disaster in Japan did not warrant any immediate changes to the operation or regulation of nuclear power plants in the US. (The NRC is expected to vote on whether or not to carry out a 90-day study of the nuclear disaster in Japan.)

The two events underscore the subservience of the so-called regulatory agencies to the very corporate interests they allegedly monitor. Even in the midst of the calamity in Japan, the Obama administration will permit nothing that infringes upon the interests of the major US energy corporations.

Obama is an advocate of expanded nuclear energy use. He and his former chief-of-staff, Rahm Emanuel, enjoy close personal and financial connections to the largest nuclear energy producer in the US, Illinois-based Exelon.

Vermont Yankee already has a poor record, including confirmed tests that it has released radioactive tritium into groundwater through underground piping. Tritium is known to raise the risk of cancer. The exposure caught Entergy in an apparent lie—it had earlier insisted that it did not use its underground pipes.

“They didn’t admit they had a problem until it was literally springing up at their feet,” nuclear disaster expert Paul Gunter of Beyond Nuclear told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The pipes’ springing leaks are a sign that the same ongoing degradation mechanism of corrosion is continuing. The plant has miles and miles of underground piping that is not being inspected and maintained.”

Bob Stannard of Citizens’ Action Network told Vermont Public Radio, “It’s unimaginable to think that the NRC would declare this plant safe when this plant houses 640 tons of spent fuel in an unprotected fuel pool with no containment vessel; In Japan, the plant that’s in the worst shape has only 80 tons.”

Whether or not Vermont Yankee continues operation may well be decided in court. At this

point it appears likely that the state legislature will vote against extending its license, which in Vermont must also be approved at the state level. In that case, Entergy would likely sue, and the courts would decide whether federal or state regulation is decisive in the case.

Entergy is also encountering opposition to the extension of its license at the Indian Point nuclear plant, which is located only a few miles from the New York City metropolitan area, home to 19 million people. The plant is located close to the Ramapo Fault, which some geologists argue is likely to produce a significant earthquake. According to a study from Columbia University, the plant sits “astride the previously unidentified intersection of two active seismic zones.”

There are 23 nuclear power plants in the US that use the same General Electric (GE) Mark 1 reactor as the Fukushima Daiichi complex in Japan. The decision to carry on power production at Vermont Yankee and Borchardt’s announcement that there was no need for substantial changes to US nuclear energy production signal that these 23 plants will carry on as before, even though their reactor designs are “demonstrably deficient,” in the words of physicist Tom Cochran of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

A recently released report from the Union of Concerned Scientists, based on NRC data, found that 14 “significant events”—or “near-misses”—took place in 2010 at US nuclear power plants, the result of “reactor owners and even the NRC tolerat[ing] known safety problems.” (See [“Report details 14 “near-misses” at US nuclear power plants in 2010”](#))

Gunter of Beyond Nuclear said that as early as 1972, the Atomic Energy Agency, forerunner of the NRC, had been aware that the Mark 1 reactor should not be used. Later studies indicated that the reactor faced a 90 percent probability of failure in the event of a major accident.

Another critic of the extension of nuclear plants’ licenses is Thomas Saporito, a whistleblower who worked as a technician in several nuclear power plants in three different states. He has been blackballed from the industry for raising safety concerns with the NRC.

“The plants are not designed to go past 40 years,” Saporito told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The Vermont plant has had multiple failures of their safety systems. The NRC blows all this stuff off, turns a blind eye.

“Now that they’ve reached the end of their 40-year design basis, the NRC is just rubber-stamping these 20-year extensions. They have not yet turned down a single applicant.” Saporito says that a failure of these systems is likely even in the absence of a major natural calamity.

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