VT Panel Urges Prompt Nuke Decommissioning

DAVE GRAM, Associated Press

MONTPELIER, Vt. (AP) — A panel that advises Vermont state policymakers on activities at the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant on Wednesday passed a resolution urging prompt dismantlement after the reactor closes next year.

Adoption of a recommendation much less aggressive in tone than one considered and tabled last week came after one panel member warned that the tougher stance could prompt more court battles with plant owner Entergy Corp.

"I think it's long past the time we should start negotiating with Entergy instead of litigating," said Rep. Mike Herbert, R-Vernon, a member of the Vermont State Nuclear Advisory Panel. "We don't do well at that, and it's costing our taxpayers and ratepayers a lot of money."

Last week, the seven-member panel, due to absences and abstentions, failed to muster majority support for a resolution calling on the state Public Service Board, which regulates utilities, to condition a new operating permit for Vermont Yankee on an agreement by Entergy that it would pursue prompt decommissioning of the Vernon reactor.

A resolution approved Wednesday said the panel urged state officials to pursue a strategy to "promptly release the site for unrestricted use." But the resolution stopped short of urging that a new permit for the plant be conditioned on prompt dismantlement.

Entergy announced Aug. 27 it would close the now 41-year-old reactor when its current fuel cycle ends late next year due to poor economic performance in a wholesale electricity sector made hypercompetitive by power plants using low-cost natural gas.

The announcement was welcomed by some in Vermont, a state with a strong anti-nuclear movement whose Senate had voted in 2010 to block the Public Service Board to grant the plant permission for continued operation after 2012.

That decision prompted a lawsuit by the company in which the state now has lost two rounds: at the U.S. District Court in Brattleboro and in the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New York.

The next questions for the plant's future center on the timing for its decommissioning — a process in which plant buildings are taken down and radioactive components are removed.

Entergy has said it wants to delay dismantling the plant while its radioactive

materials become less so and while a fund set up to pay for decommissioning grows. The company has not said how long the process should take, but federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission rules indicate it can take up to 60 years.

The delayed decommissioning has been dubbed "SAFSTOR" by the NRC.

Entergy said in a statement that there "are a number of advantages to SAFSTOR methodology, including lower potential radiation exposure for workers doing the decommissioning work and the need for fewer shipments of radioactive material to the low-level waste site."

But critics of delaying dismantlement of nuclear plants question whether the companies that owned them will be extant and financially responsible decades from now, and say it would be better to have been done by people familiar with the plant, rather than by future workers who, in the words of one panel member, "may not be born yet."

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