



Blowing the whistle on Vermont Yankee

By: **Terri Hallenbeck**, The Burlington Free Press, [Apr 28, 2010]



Arnie and Maggie Gundersen came to the Statehouse last week to testify about a report that detailed the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant and its underground pipes.

Sitting before a legislative committee, Arnie Gundersen recounted the details of the plant and their proximity to the Connecticut River and to the state's coastline. A committee of legislators listened intently, thirsting for information about a major leak at the Vernon plant headed into its second month. Late last week, Gundersen spoke over this information with another committee down the street. Previous coverage: Find more Vermont Yankee stories
Raw Video: [Experts testify on Vermont Yankee in Montpelier](#)
Lawmakers have come to depend on the Gundersens to help them make sense of information as they consider the 38-year-old plant's future restructuring, its eventual decommissioning, and more recent

underground pipes.

After all, it is Arnie Gundersen who months ago pointed out that the plant appeared to have underground pipes though company representatives had told state officials it did not.

It is Arnie Gundersen who sounded an alarm about the plant's cooling towers not long before they crumpled. It is Arnie Gundersen who raised the issue in 2007 that Vermont Yankee's decommissioning fund would eventually shut the plant down, a claim the company denied at the time but later conceded would need to be increased. "Arnie Gundersen is the only person who's been right about Vermont Yankee every time," said Senate Finance Committee Chairman Shumlin, D-Windham, who two years ago appointed Gundersen to an oversight panel to study Vermont Yankee. Since then, the Legislature's Joint Fiscal Office has contracted the Gundersens to study Vermont Yankee for up to \$47,000.

Although the Legislature — and by extension the public — has come to rely on Arnie Gundersen to help them make sense of information as they consider the 38-year-old plant's future restructuring, its eventual decommissioning, and more recent inside the Vernon nuclear power plant, Public Service Commissioner David O'Brien bristles at the very mention of Gundersen. O'Brien contends Gundersen's warnings have not been as on the mark as some would suggest, is weary of Gundersen's accusations, and is weary with accusatory questions.

"We've always responded to Arnie in a timely manner. That's always been met with accusations," O'Brien said. "Arnie has been in an accusatory mode, accusing us of not being forthcoming. That makes it very hard to operate."

How did this 61-year-old former nuclear engineer who left the industry years ago and relocated to Burlington become such a central figure in the evolving saga of Vermont Yankee?

Insider to Whistleblower

Gundersen was a senior vice president for Nuclear Energy Services in Connecticut when he found inappropriate material in 1990 and spoke up about it. He quickly found he had crossed the line from nuclear industry insider to whistleblower. He was the subject of a 1995 New York Times article on whistleblowers, which detailed a long road of contention. Maggie Gundersen described her husband as an Eagle Scout and honor student who was hardly a rabble-rouser. Gundersen said the events in Connecticut changed his view of the nuclear industry.

"Having this experience of blowing the whistle and having the federal government fail makes you think the system worked. I thought the NRC was enforcing its laws. I found just the opposite."

These days, Gundersen finds himself on the other side of the fence, often hired as an expert by anti-nuclear groups like the Nuclear Energy and Environmental Justice Coalition. He said, however, he is not opposed to nuclear power.

He described his stance on nuclear power this way: The nation should not build any more oil or coal plants. It should focus on energy conservation and efficiency. If more power is needed beyond that, nuclear is a better option to him than