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# Vt nuke plant leaks renew debate over aging plants

AP Associated Press

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By DAVE GRAM, Associated Press Writer - Mon Feb 1, 5:47 pm ET



AP - In this photo taken June 9, 2009, the spent fuel pool is seen at the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant ...

MONTPELIER, Vt. - Radioactive tritium, a carcinogen discovered in potentially dangerous levels in groundwater at the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant, has now tainted at least 27 of the nation's 104 nuclear reactors — raising concerns about how it is escaping from the aging nuclear plants.

The leaks — many from deteriorating underground pipes — come as the nuclear industry is seeking and obtaining federal license renewals, casting itself as a clean-green alternative to power plants that burn fossil fuels.

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Tritium, found in nature in tiny amounts and a product of nuclear fusion, has been linked to cancer if ingested, inhaled or absorbed through the skin in large amounts.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission said Monday that new tests at a monitoring well on Vermont Yankee's site in Vernon registered 70,500 picocuries per liter, more than three times the federal safety standard of 20,000 picocuries per liter.

That is the highest reading yet at the Vermont Yankee plant, where the original discovery last month drew sharp criticism by Gov. Jim Douglas and others. Officials of the New Orleans-based Entergy Corp., which owns the plant in Vernon in Vermont's southeast corner, have admitted misleading state regulators and lawmakers by saying the plant did not have the kind of underground pipes that could leak tritium into groundwater.

"What has happened at Vermont Yankee is a breach of trust that cannot be tolerated," said Douglas, who until now has been a strong supporter of the state's lone nuclear plant.

Vermont Yankee has said no tritium has been found in area drinking water supplies or in the Connecticut River and that earlier, lesser tritium levels discovered last month were of no health concern.

"The existence of tritium in such low levels does not present a risk to public health or safety whatsoever," plant spokesman Robert Williams said in an e-mail Monday.

President Barack Obama, in his State of the Union address last week, called for "building a new generation of safe, clean nuclear power plants in this country." His 2011 budget request to Congress on Monday called for \$54 billion in additional loan guarantees for nuclear power.

The 104 nuclear reactors operating in 31 states provide only 20 percent of the nation's electricity. But they are responsible for 70 percent of the power from non-greenhouse gas producing sources, including wind, solar and hydroelectric dams.

Vermont Yankee is just the latest of dozens of U.S. nuclear plants, many built in the 1960s and '70s, to be found with leaking tritium.

The Braidwood nuclear station in Illinois was found in the 1990s to be leaking millions of gallons of tritium-laced water, some of which contaminated residential water wells. Plant owner Exelon Corp. ended up paying for a new municipal water system.

After Braidwood, the nuclear industry stepped up voluntary checking for tritium in groundwater at plants around the country, testing that revealed the Vermont Yankee problem, plant officials said.

In New Jersey last year, tritium was reported leaking a second time from the Oyster Creek plant in Ocean County, just days after Exelon won NRC approval for a 20-year license extension there. The Pilgrim plant in

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Plymouth, Mass., like Vermont Yankee, owned by Entergy, reported low levels of tritium on the ground in 2007. The Vermont leak has prompted a Plymouth-area citizens group to demand more test wells at the Massachusetts plant.

NRC spokesman Neil Sheehan says leaks have occurred at least 27 of the nation's 104 commercial reactors at 65 plant sites. He said the list likely does not include every plant where tritium has leaked.

The leaks have several causes; underground pipes corroding and the leaking of spent fuel storage pools are the most common. The source of the leak or leaks at Vermont Yankee has not been found; at Oyster Creek, corroded underground pipes were implicated.

Many radiological health scientists agree with the Environmental Protection Agency that tritium, like other radioactive isotopes, can cause cancer.

That worries Vermont public officials and lawmakers. Rep. Tony Klein, chairman of the Natural Resources and Energy Committee in the Vermont House, said he fears public officials may be downplaying the risk.

"When you have public officials that the public depends on for their health and welfare making casual statements that a radioactive substance is not harmful to you, I think that's ludicrous," Klein said.

There's disagreement on the severity of the risk.

"Somebody would have to be drinking a lot of water and it would have to be really concentrated in there for it to do any harm at all," said Jacqueline Williams, a radiation biologist at the University of Rochester Medical Center in New York state.

But in 2005, the National Academy of Sciences concluded after an exhaustive study that even the tiniest amount of ionizing radiation increases the risk of cancer.

"The scientific research base shows that there is no threshold of exposure below which low levels of ionizing radiation can be demonstrated to be harmless or beneficial," Richard R. Monson, associate dean for professional education and professor of epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health, said when the NAS released its study.

Paul Gunter of the Maryland-based anti-nuclear group Beyond Nuclear, said in many instances, it's impossible to know how much tritium is getting into the environment.

"These are uncontrolled, unmonitored releases from these plants," he said.

Steve Kerekes, spokesman for the Nuclear Energy Institute, an industry group, said the public shouldn't be unduly worried.

"These are industrial facilities, and any industrial facility from time to time is going to have equipment problems or challenges," Kerekes said. "Not every operational issue rises to the level of being a safety issue."

Vermont, with a strong anti-nuclear movement, is the only state in the country where the Legislature decides whether to relicense a nuclear plant. Vermont Yankee's current 40-year license is up in 2012, and Entergy is asking for 20 more years.

(This version CORRECTS tense in first paragraph and adds comment from plant spokesman.)

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