

# Vt. politicians support Rowe shutdown; residents unsure

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The Associated Press

MONTPELIER — Tuesday's recommendation to shut down the Yankee Rowe nuclear plant was praised by politicians but rapped by nearby residents.

The staff of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission urged the immediate shutdown of the western Massachusetts plant because of new safety concerns. Later in the day, plant officials said they would shut the reactor down under protest.

The 31-year-old nuclear plant, the oldest in the country, sits a handful of miles from several towns along the southern Vermont border.

Vermont politicians praised the NRC staff recommendations.

"Yankee Rowe has been endangering the health and safety of millions of New Englanders every day it continued to operate,"

said Rep. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt.

But those living in the shadow of the plant are not so convinced.

"I think it's an overreaction," said William Levine, Stamford's civil defense director. "It's a reaction to people's anti-nuclear sentiment. It was an emotional response rather than a factual response."

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., recently called for the plant's shutdown.

"You don't patch and tape when you are dealing with a nuclear reactor," Leahy said Tuesday. "You shut the whole thing down and you don't start it up again until every contingency has been accounted for."

Sen. James Jeffords, R-Vt., said the decision to close was a wise one.

"It was a very prudent approach to take," he said. "I'm sure they are not only concerned with public safety, but the perceptions of the whole nuclear industry."

Gov. Howard Dean said the NRC staffers are experts, so the recommendation should be followed.

"I'm not worried about it blowing up tonight, but there's no reason for not proceeding immediately," Dean said. "When the NRC technical staff calls for a shutdown, there's no question it should be shut down and shut down at once."

Sanders said the shutdown should be an impetus for energy conversion.

"It's time to close it for good and begin the transition to an economy based on clean, renewable, safe sources of energy," Sanders said.

There are five Vermont towns within Yankee Rowe's 10-mile emergency planning zone, said George Lowe, state director of emergency management. Those towns are Stamford, Readsboro, Whitingham, Wilmington and Halifax.

Lowe, who would help oversee the civilian response to a Yankee Rowe emergency, said it was not his place to comment on the shutdown.

"We have responsibility off-site," he said. "On site, that's clearly NRC."

Area officials said they were not worried about Yankee Rowe's safety before Tuesday's shutdown and were not going to worry about it now, despite the NRC staff recommendation. They also said they trusted the Yankee Rowe officials and employees — many of whom live in their towns — who kept saying the plant was safe.

K. William LeGuier, civil defense coordinator for Readsboro, said the staff may be "overstating" the problem.

"At this point I haven't heard any additional information to indicate that it was a greater problem now than it was a week

ago," LeGuier said. "I think this shutdown is a little premature."

He believes the decision was due to public and political pressure.

Others said they believed the plant would remain open until next year.

"I'm surprised," said Wayne Harris, chairman of the selectmen in Whitingham. "I figure they know what they're doing. You have to trust somebody."

Levine, Stamford's civil defense coordinator, said the shutdown comes just before the peak energy demand of the winter. He said that could have a serious impact on energy costs.

Levine and others said many of their fellow residents work at the plant, thus creating an economic hardship.

"It was poor timing," Levine said. "It's going to create a lot of expense that wasn't warranted."