

Something is 'very wrong at Yankee Rowe'

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WASHINGTON

The Yankee Rowe nuclear power plant, located in the town of Rowe, Mass., just a short distance from the Vermont border, could well be the site of the first nuclear meltdown in the nation — if you don't count the partial meltdown at Three Mile Island.

Extremely serious charges have been raised by current and former staffers of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and by other responsible and knowledgeable persons, about the condition of the reactor pressure vessel at Yankee Rowe. This vessel, composed of metal alloys, is about 8 feet in diameter, 10 feet high, and 8 inches thick. The alloys have become embrittled by age and by the intense bombardment of radiation over many years, resulting in a situation in which the vessel could rupture under conditions of unusual temperature and pressure.

If the vessel were to rupture, the cool water would be lost and a meltdown could result, releasing dangerous radiation to the winds. The destination of the radiation — Vermont to the north, New York to



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DEATH ROWE

the west, Connecticut to the south or Massachusetts to the east — would depend on the vagaries of the weather conditions at the time.

The evidence is overwhelming that there is something very wrong at Yankee Rowe. The Union of Concerned Scientists, a group with long experience and undenied expertise on nuclear power, has cited chapter and verse on numerous violations of the NRC's own safety rules. Yet the pressure vessel has not even been examined to determine the severity of these violations and the embrittlement problem.

The brittleness problem of Yankee Rowe's pressure vessel is not due just to improper procedures, but also in large measure to the reactor's great age. Yankee Rowe is the oldest operating nuclear power plant in the nation, ordered from Westinghouse in 1956. If it were an automobile it would have to carry antique license plates.

Nevertheless, the plant's owners intend to continue operating it, and not only to the limits of its 40-year license. They clearly expect to seek

an extension of that license for 20 years more!

Under the guise of "this is nothing new" and "we're just the target of people who want to stop nuclear power," the management of Yankee Rowe and the NRC are placing at risk the lives and health of some 2 million people who reside within a 50-mile radius of the plant. This area includes the cities of Bennington and Brattleboro in Vermont, the entire capital district of Albany, Troy and Schenectady, N.Y., and the Massachusetts communities of Springfield, Pittsfield, Holyoke, Amherst and Williamston.

I have sought to avoid jumping the gun on this issue. I have been working with the newly elected representative from Massachusetts, John Olver, in whose congressional district the plant is located, and with other members of the Vermont and Massachusetts delegations. On Tuesday, Rep. Olver and I, together with Rep. Edward Markey of Massachusetts and Sens. Patrick Leahy of Vermont and John Kerry and Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts,

wrote to the NRC to express our concern.

We asked the NRC's chairman, Kenneth M. Carr, to investigate the alleged safety violations at Yankee Rowe and to demonstrate formally that the plant is in full compliance with the commission's safety requirements. We said that unless the questions of safety which have been raised are adequately addressed, the plant should not continue to operate.

Local officials in Massachusetts have also expressed their concern about the plant. State Sen. Christopher Hodgkins of Berkshire County has demanded that the plant be shut down, as has a unanimous vote of the Board of Selectmen of Williamston.

A shutdown of the plant, such as occurred last month when the plant was struck by lightning and lost its own electrical power, would have minimal effects on New England's energy supplies. One of the ironies of the debate is that the amount of power generated by the Rowe plant, 175 megawatts, is almost negligible in terms of the needs of the overall

energy grid. Even the most modest of efforts in energy conservation, if implemented by the region's utilities, could save more energy than Yankee Rowe generates.

In reality, the continued operation of Yankee Rowe is part of a large game being played by those in high places. The Bush Administration is determined to justify its reliance on nuclear energy, and if Yankee Rowe were to stop operating while the scientists' concerns could be studied, their argument would be weakened in a most embarrassing fashion.

It's a sorry day when the public health and safety have to be gambled with because these sorts of political reasons. The risks are just not worth it. The plant's owners and the NRC should, at a minimum, halt the operation of this dangerous plant while the charges are properly investigated. To do anything less is to arrogantly put questions of economic and political power ahead of the safety of New England's people.

Bernard Sanders, an independent, is Vermont's representative in the U.S. House.