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Entergy's Nuclear Limbo Threatens Public Safety

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Entergy, the corporation that owns the troubled Vermont Yankee, FitzPatrick and Pilgrim nuclear reactors is cutting the workforce, failing to invest in key equipment, and showing increasing indecision about keeping its reactors running. Entergy's uncertainty creates a unique safety hazard, and nuclear watchdogs have asked the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to expand an investigation into how the plants economic problems impact public safety. The request is a supplement to a petition accepted for investigation by the NRC by Citizens Awareness Network, Vermont Citizens Action Network, Alliance for a Green Economy, and Pilgrim Watch.

The NRC agreed on August 7 to investigate Entergy for compliance with the financial qualifications regulation at the three reactors. The supplement asks NRC to expand the scope of the investigation to look deeper into the ways Entergy's decision-making at the plants regarding staffing levels, equipment maintenance, and safety upgrades is affected by economic distress at the plants.

Entergy's decision and information released in its public statements confirm it is operating Vermont Yankee and FitzPatrick in violation of financial qualifications regulations. This development also reinforces the need to investigate Entergy's financial qualifications to operate Pilgrim. The groups focused on projected financial losses at all three plants; it asked the NRC to enforce its financial qualifications regulations, which require companies to generate enough money to maintain a nuclear reactor. Enforcement action is necessary because:

1. Entergy's VY closure announcement and subsequent statements confirm that Entergy is not financially qualified to operate VY and FitzPatrick, and possibly Pilgrim; it indicates that the financial conditions under which the corporation is operating the reactors are worse than projected by UBS.
2. Entergy's intention to continue operating VY for more than a year is unprecedented and poses new and unreviewed risks to the public health and safety.
3. The succession of company-wide layoffs and the closure of VY may have a chilling effect on the workforce at all three reactors, presenting an increased risk of cross-cutting human performance and quality assurance and quality control programs (QAQC) issues.

Entergy announced in August that it would shut Vermont Yankee because it expected to sustain significant losses in operating the troubled reactor. That August 27 announcement sparked renewed speculation that the FitzPatrick or Pilgrim reactors could be next. It also raised serious concerns about Entergy's continuing to operate Vermont Yankee for over 14 months. Entergy's decision is unprecedented and raises serious safety concerns.

The eventuality of Entergy operating a financially distressed reactor for such an extended period of time after a closure announcement poses unprecedented threats to the public health and safety and must not be permitted. Entergy's decision is most likely based on its short-term financial interests rather than operational logistics. "This decision plainly puts profits and investor confidence ahead of the public

and worker health and safety, despite the inherent danger in operating a reactor the licensee now has no long-term interest in maintaining,” said Tim Judson, president of Citizens Awareness Network (CAN).

“Operating a nuclear reactor under financial distress is dangerous and illegal, so we are calling on the NRC to do its job here and shut this reactor down before the cost cutting causes an accident.” said Deb Katz, executive director of CAN. This decision puts plant managers and staff in the untenable situation of continuing to operate a reactor for an extended period of time in which the parent company limits its investment in maintenance; The supplement also raises concerns that uncertainty at the plants could impact worker's willingness to report problems that could impact the company financially. “Entergy will face increasing difficulties in retaining experienced and qualified personnel to ensure safe operation of the plant, said Katz.

“Entergy is not able to turn a profit at Vermont Yankee or FitzPatrick and so it is cutting costs by on the backs of workers and public safety,” said Jessica Azulay, Syracuse-based organizer for the Alliance for a Green Economy.

“Operating nuclear reactors in this limbo is a public safety issue, as key equipment goes unrepaired and unplanned power changes mount, Entergy is clearly placing investor confidence and short-term economic concerns ahead of public health and safety, necessitating NRC emergency enforcement, said Chris Williams President of Vermont Citizens Action Network.”

The groups are calling for a “just transition” for Vermont Yankee, FitzPatrick and Pilgrim workers and as well as the communities that they operate in. This transition focuses on shutting down the reactors, then retaining as much of the workforce as possible for cleanup while funding job-creating renewable energy projects in the county.

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