

Yankee discharge hearing is held

By BOB AUDETTE, Reformer Staff
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NEWFANE -- An expert on thermal discharge testified Tuesday that a 1 degree increase in the temperature of water expelled from the cooling system of the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant into the Connecticut River will not affect fish, shellfish and wildlife.

In March 2006, the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources approved a permit allowing "a slight increase in the station's thermal effluent limitations (1 degree) during the summer months."

Several environmental and anti-nuclear groups opposed the permit and the temperature increase was put on hold until the Vermont Environmental Court had a chance to hear all the evidence brought before it by both sides.

On Tuesday, the first of several days of hearings in Newfane began with Craig Swanson, an independent consultant hired by Entergy, who reviewed the plume of heated water leaving the plant and how it affects the Vernon pool, the standing water above the Vernon Dam.

Elise Zoli, of Goodwin Procter in Boston, speaking on behalf of Entergy, told Judge Meredith Wright that the modeling provided by Swanson proved the temperature increase would not adversely affect the nine species of fish, shellfish and wildlife that the Agency of Natural Resources is concerned about.

Another expert will testify that "there is no statistically determinable trend in fish population numbers reasonably attributable to the plant's discharge," said Zoli.

"The question you have to answer for yourself is whether the evidence proves to your satisfaction that the 1 degree increase that is being sought" doesn't affect the nine species, said Pat Parenteau, speaking on behalf of the Connecticut River Watershed Council.

"Temperature ... affects every single phase of the lifecycle of the fish in question," he said. The watershed council is mainly concerned with two species -- American shad and Atlantic salmon -- which have undergone restoration efforts since the 1980s.

"In 1991, the number of shad that passed Vernon Dam was 37,000," said Parenteau. As of Monday, he said, that number was 57.

"No one has explained why that decline is so dramatic in the upper reaches of the river," he said. "We cannot rule out Vermont Yankee discharge as a contributing factor in these keystone species."

Parenteau also wanted to know about the cumulative effects of temperature increases since the power plant began discharging cooling water into the river starting in the 1970s. Since 1991, Yankee has been allowed a "fivefold increase in the cumulative increases," he said. "Now they are asking for another degree."

"Nothing can be more destructive of a biological community than this constant ratcheting of temperature increases," he said, adding that Environmental Protection Agency regulations require an analysis of the cumulative effect and how it will change the river into the future.

Swanson told the court he was asked to evaluate the change between existing conditions and if the 1 degree increase is allowed, and not how the river has changed since the plant began operating.

Using 34,000 data points in the pool, Swanson evaluated the thermal plume and its progression toward the Vernon Dam. Temperatures in the pool were taken from May to November 2002, said Swanson.

Cooling water flows from the plant at between 100 to 800 cubic feet per second. There are approximately 7.5 gallons of water in a cubic foot. The cooling water is right around 100 degrees when it leaves the plant, said Swanson.

Evan Mullholland, speaking for the New England Coalition on Nuclear Pollution, said the only reason for the temperature increase is to supply surplus electricity that is not needed in Vermont.

"Alternatives do exist that will enable Vermont Yankee to generate electricity without the extra thermal insult to the environment," said Mullholland.

Those alternatives include using the plant's cooling towers, replacing the plant's steam condenser and using cooling pools to decrease the temperature of discharge waters before they enter the river.

Representatives from Vermont Yankee said using the cooling towers "requires energy that reduces the total electric output of the station and the Vernon Dam."

"Consequently, increased use of cooling towers may negatively impact the price of power."

No hearings are scheduled for Wednesday. They are due to resume Thursday at 9 a.m. in Windham Superior Court in Newfane.

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