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Maine Yankee officials agree to dig deeper

By: KRIS FERRAZZA

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WISCASSET - After a year of discussion and negotiation, Maine Yankee has agreed to perform additional testing and cleanup at the request of state officials and local anti-nuclear activists. Members of Maine Yankee, state government and Friends of the Coast, an Edgecomb-based environmental organization, called a Sept. 10 press conference to announce they had reached agreement on how much additional effort should be put into the project.

At least for the time being.

Although the ink is barely dry on the settlement, Friends of the Coast spokesman Ray Shadis of Edgecomb said there are sure to be more battles in the future.

"There still are issues we view differently," Shadis said, adding, "I have great hopes we will work through them."

He praised Maine Yankee for agreeing to take environmental samples and do additional testing at the site and for committing to a cleanup standard that is more restrictive than the one required by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC).

"We've accomplished a great deal," he said, adding that is "all to the benefit of the environment," and will go far to enhance public confidence in the cleanup.

All sides have signed a settlement agreement involving Maine Yankee's "License Termination Plan," which details how the company intends to meet state and federal cleanup requirements while decommissioning the Wiscasset nuclear power plant.

Maine Yankee Chief Nuclear Officer Michael Meisner said he was pleased with the cooperative effort among the three parties, and predicted the cleanup will exceed the limits outlined in the agreement.

"Maine Yankee, Friends of the Coast and the state came from fairly different points of view to come up with a plan that will, in my view, enhance public confidence," he said.

Maine Yankee President Wayne Norton said he too was "extremely pleased" with the results, calling the settlement "an unprecedented agreement, certainly for Maine Yankee, and maybe broader, nationally."

State Nuclear Safety Advisor Paula Craighead said the state was not satisfied with Maine Yankee's first plan, and sought specifics. She noted some technical issues and intertidal zone issues remain, but they will be resolved by NRC, all parties have agreed.

"We don't feel the state gave up anything," she said of the settlement process, and added, "Our focus was on safety of workers, the local community, and the public at large."

Craighead said that while the three parties appear to be in agreement, "controversy will remain" as new issues are reviewed, raised with Maine Yankee, and discussed.

Maine Yankee said the additional samples and testing to be done should have little, if any, impact on the decommissioning budget or schedule. Norton pointed out that it is an alternative to a "costly adjudicatory process" which would have allowed the state and activists, as intervenors, to call for formal hearings similar to court proceedings.

Meisner concluded the additions to Maine Yankee's plan should bolster public confidence, and added, "These are things that would need to have been done anyway."

Nuclear critic Bill Linnell of Safe Energy in Portland on Tuesday railed against the settlement, saying it is unworthy of praise.

"People need to be reminded that this site still will be dirty enough to qualify for superfund cleanup," he said. "These new restrictions are not as strict as Maine Yankee, and the state, and Ray Shadis would have people believe."

Officials at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have said the Maine Yankee site, once decommissioned, still would qualify for superfund cleanup. However it will meet, and exceed, requirements set by another federal agency: NRC.

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