Tiny Vermont inspires Michiganders, Hoosiers, and Chicagoans in campaign to shutdown Palisades atomic reactor

Green Mountain State victory against Entergy Nuclear serves as a hopeful model

South Haven, MI—Chris Williams, a leading grassroots organizer for environmental groups Vermont Citizens Action Network (VCAN) and Vermont Yankee Decommissioning Alliance (VYDA), shared the story of Vermont’s recent “David versus Goliath” victory against industry giant Entergy Nuclear, as well as the monolithic U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC). Williams, formerly the executive director of Citizens Action Coalition of Indiana, spoke to a crowd of concerned citizens at Lake Michigan College, including environmental campaigners from Michigan and Illinois who have long sought the permanent shutdown of Entergy’s problem-plagued Palisades atomic reactor, located on the Lake Michigan shoreline in Covert, about five miles south of South Haven.

“Entergy Nuclear has long been referred to by the top elected leaders of Vermont as a ‘rogue corporation,’ after its high-ranking officials repeatedly lied to the State under oath,” Williams said.

Williams described how years and even decades of widespread grassroots environmental activism and community organizing moved Vermont’s elected officials to take such a strong position of opposition to the Vermont Yankee atomic reactor’s requested 20-year license extension.

In February 2010, the Vermont State Senate voted, 26 to 4, to block the granting of a State "Certificate of Public Good," required for Entergy to do business in the Green Mountain State during the license extension period. Although NRC rubber-stamped it in March 2011, just days after the twin-designed reactors at Fukushima Daiichi had melted down, exploded, and released catastrophic amounts of hazardous radioactivity, the Green Mountain State and its citizenry fought on. Although Vermont lost battles in federal district and appeals courts regarding NRC's jurisdiction over radiological safety issues, it ultimately won the war: in August 2013, Entergy announced Vermont Yankee would shut for good by the end of 2014.
In 2007, NRC rubber-stamped Palisades 20-year license extension, despite widespread disbelief, concern, and resistance. A public interest and environmental coalition highlighted the fact that Palisades has the worst embrittled reactor pressure vessel in the U.S., at risk of catastrophic failure, meltdown, and radioactivity release. A long list of major safety repairs needed at Palisades, admitted to by previous owner Consumers Energy, has gone undone for 7 years by Entergy, with no relief in sight.

“When Entergy Nuclear’s high-priced lobbyist Christie Todd Whitman said last October that Michigan was not Vermont, we decided to invite Chris Williams to teach us all how to make Michigan a bit more like Vermont,” said Beyond Nuclear’s Kevin Kamps. “I don’t want my hometown’s slogan to become ‘Yes, there really WAS a Kalamazoo’ if the worst happens at Palisades, as it has at Chernobyl and Fukushima,” said Kamps, who represents the Kalamazoo chapter on the state-wide board of directors of Don’t Waste Michigan.

“We just learned how there came a point where Vermonters were clear that Entergy’s age-degraded, leaking atomic reactor was incompatible with its ‘Pure Vermont’ brand,” said Bette Pierman of Michigan Safe Energy Future—South Haven Chapter. “Palisades is now clearly incompatible with the Great Lakes State’s ‘Pure Michigan’ branding, as well,” Pierman added.

Palisades first admitted radioactivity leaks into groundwater, which flows into Lake Michigan, in 2007. Last May, Palisades spilled 82.1 gallons of radioactive water into Lake Michigan.

Williams also described how community organizing can not only shutdown dirty, dangerous, and expensive atomic reactors, but also replace them with efficiency and renewables like wind and solar, a transition very much under way in Vermont. He also explained how a recent decommissioning agreement was hammered out by the State of Vermont, requiring Entergy to clean up the radioactive contamination of the Vermont Yankee site and safeguard the high-level radioactive wastes stored there beginning right away, not decades from now.

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Beyond Nuclear aims to educate and activate the public about the connections between nuclear power and nuclear weapons and the need to abandon both to safeguard our future. Beyond Nuclear advocates for an energy future that is sustainable, benign and democratic.