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Opponents to 20 More Years at Davis-Besse Challenge New Flaws

Renewables Cited as Inevitable Replacement

Oak Harbor, OH—Citing renewable sources of electricity, such as wind power and solar photo-voltaics (PV), as ready replacements for Davis-Besse, a coalition of environmental groups and concerned citizens filed comments by last night’s midnight deadline on the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s (NRC) Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) regarding FirstEnergy Nuclear Operating Company’s (FENOC) proposed 20-year license extension at the problem-plagued atomic reactor. At the same time, a coalition of official interveners resisting the extension launched its latest salvo in the three and a half year old licensing proceeding. Since late 2010, they have called for Davis-Besse to be closed by Earth Day (April 22), 2017 – the expiration date for its original 40-year license – if not sooner, given the worsening breakdown risks.

Both DEIS comments, as well as the legal filing to the NRC Atomic Safety and Licensing Board (ASLB) have been posted at Beyond Nuclear’s homepage, www.beyondnuclear.org.

The official interveners – Beyond Nuclear, Citizens Environment Alliance of Southwestern Ontario, Don’t Waste MI, and the Green Party of OH, represented by Toledo attorney Terry Lodge – have raised the Shield Building (SB) wall gap, first reported by the Toledo Blade in mid-February, to the ASLB. The interveners faced a short 60-day deadline by which to do so, after NRC’s official public notice of the revelation.

The environmental coalition also cited 15 cracks, found on the SB in August/September 2013, that were not identified previously, as evidence of worsening, age-related cracking.

The coalition has also unearthed documents revealing that Davis-Besse also had SB wall gaps stemming from the 2002 replacement of its severely corroded reactor lid.

The evidence of worsening cracking contradicts FirstEnergy’s root cause conclusion, published in the first half of 2012, that the Blizzard of 1978 cracked the SB over a three-day period, but hadn’t gotten worse over the past 36 years. Given the revelations of worsening cracking, FENOC is now undertaking its third root cause analysis since late 2011.

The interveners have re-asserted their earlier warnings that Davis-Besse’s record-breaking fourth breach of the SB has risked significant degradation of the containment structure. The coalition’s (including OH Sierra Club) expert witness challenging
FirstEnergy’s current, experimental steam generator replacement, nuclear engineer Arnie Gundersen of Fairewinds Associates, testified last year that he knows of no other reactor that has breached its containment more times than has Davis-Besse.

The interveners have also raised issues revealed to a concerned local resident by an NRC official, David Hills, at the March 25, 2014 DEIS public comment meeting at Camp Perry, OH. At least 26 sections of steel reinforcement (rebar) had been broken and/or cracked in the 2011 (and 2014) construction opening area, each break or crack apparently located close to the mechanical splice coupling used to reconnect the rebar during the reactor head replacement outage in 2011.

The interveners cited evidence previously entered into the record that a Jan. 31, 2012 NRC inspection report revealed FirstEnergy was cited for attempting to use sub-standard rebar in its repair to the 2011 SB access opening. They questioned whether the installation of bad rebar contributed to the damage revealed last month.

NRC’s Hills also confided that FirstEnergy “had decided to leave the forms on the inside wall because they knew they would have to cut through them again in 2 years.” He further explained that “The rebar was damaged during the cutting of this opening [in 2014]” and, “The hydro saw damaged the rebar.” He said to the concerned local resident that “The reason seems to be that there is a problem at the area of the splice of the rebar from the last [2011] cut,” conceding that the rebar is crimped and clamped and that there appears to have been stress on the rebar splice, and that it is a problem “unseen” before.

Even FirstEnergy’s expert witness, Dr. Darwin, involved in analyzing the root cause of cracking in 2011-2012 conceded that cracking in the region of spliced rebar would represent a significant structural problem.

Interveners pointed out that a single Impulse Response or other acoustic test could have revealed the SB wall gap in late 2011. Also, if metal forms had not blocked the view, the gap would have been visible by visual examination. Instead, Davis-Besse was allowed to operate for over two years, at full power, with a severely compromised containment. The environmental coalition has called for a significant expansion of the 2017-2037 Aging Management Plan (AMP), to monitor for cracking, gaps, and damage in both the concrete and rebar of the SB.

On April 15, in a “Request for Additional Information,” the NRC itself asked FirstEnergy how the worsening cracking, as well as the rebar damage, will change its SB AMP during the proposed license extension.

“From the massive corrosion hole in the reactor lid in 2002, to recurring Shield Building wall gaps in 2002 and 2011, Davis-Besse has a deep and concerning history of quality assurance failures,” said Terry Lodge, Toledo-based legal counsel for the environmental interveners. “FirstEnergy has elevated QA itself to an aging management problem at Davis-Besse.”
“The nuclear industry paradigm is in collapse,” said Michael Keegan of Don’t Waste MI in Monroe. “The good news is that renewables are ready to go.”

Public comments to NRC on the DEIS included a recent report by PJM Interconnect (Pennsylvania-(New) Jersey-Maryland), the country’s largest electric grid, serving 13 states, reporting that wind power and solar PV are readily integrated onto transmission lines and available in abundance.

Comments also included a recent report by Amory Lovins of Rocky Mountain Institute, presented at a Three Mile Island+35 forum, in which he stated: “Reactors are promoted as costly to build but cheap to run. Yet as Daniel Allegretti ably described, many existing, long-paid-for U.S. reactors are now starting to be shut down because just their operating cost can no longer compete with wholesale power prices, typically depressed by gas-fired plants or windpower.”

(Davis-Besse and Three Mile Island (TMI) Unit 2, which experienced a 50% core meltdown on March 28, 1979, are twin reactors. In fact, Davis-Besse experienced a "TMI precursor incident," narrowly averting disaster itself. The "lesson learned" was never communicated, leading inevitably to the TMI meltdown 18 months later.)

“Davis-Besse has been identified as one of the top reactors at risk of near-term shutdown, even before its license expires in three years,” said Kevin Kamps of Beyond Nuclear, based in Takoma Park, Maryland. “The question remains, will it be shutdown before, God forbid, it melts down, breaching its crumbling Shield Building, and releasing catastrophic amounts of hazardous radioactivity into the environment?”

Two weeks ago, energy economist Mark Cooper at the Vermont Law School warned that nuclear utilities should be prepared to replace atomic reactors that succumb to economic, operational, and safety risks. Otherwise, electric grids will be thrown into chaos when, someday, the inevitable happens and reactors are permanently closed. Last summer, Cooper listed Davis-Besse as among the dozen reactors in the U.S. at highest risk of near-term shutdown, even before their licenses expire. The past year has seen a record number of reactor shutdowns (Gentilly-2, Quebec; Crystal River, FL; Kewaunee, WI; San Onofre 2 & 3, CA; and the announced shutdown of Vermont Yankee before the end of 2014).