LATEST RADIOACTIVE LEAK AT NUCLEAR PLANT FITS PATTERN OF FAILURE

Report finds owners and regulator still culpable of neglect and obfuscation

TAKOMA PARK, MD, Thursday, June 18, 2015 — A groundwater monitoring well at the Peach Bottom nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania that tested positive in April 2015 for significant levels of tritium contamination is just the latest example of a decades-long pattern of leaking nuclear reactors and a weak regulatory system that fails to openly address and fix the problem as required in licensing agreements.

These were the conclusions of a Beyond Nuclear investigative report — *Leak First, Fix Later: Uncontrolled and Unmonitored Radioactive Releases from Nuclear Power Plants* — released today. The 2015 version of the report updates the findings of the first edition, published in 2010.

“Nuclear plant operators and their regulator consistently fail to address and enforce reactor performance requirements to protect the environment and public health,” said Paul Gunter, Director of Reactor Oversight at Beyond Nuclear and the author of the report. “Our research found that U.S. nuclear power plants continue to experience uncontrolled leaks and spills of radioactive water because the buried pipes and tanks that transport and store it remain inaccessible,” Gunter said.

An industry “voluntary initiative” to report leaks and spills was put into place more than a decade after the U.S. nuclear industry was caught hiding disclosure of millions of gallons of uncontrolled and unmonitored radioactive leaks contaminating groundwater. But the industry self-reporting system singularly failed to address and prevent reoccurring leaks at nuclear plant, the report found.

“Peach Bottom is yet another example of why industry self-reporting and a lackadaisical regulator only work in the self-interest of the industry, not the public or the environment,” said Gunter. “The public is still being intentionally kept in the dark about radioactive leaks from these aging nuclear power plants.”

According to a memorandum from Exelon, the owner of Peach Bottom, water contaminated with tritium had pooled on the floor inside the turbine building as well as being found outside in the groundwater monitoring test well. However, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has made no apparent request of the company to
identify which reactor system or component is the actual source of the radioactive leak or how the uncontrolled leak made its way out of the turbine building structure into groundwater outside.

“The practice of ‘leak first, fix later ’ – essentially mopping up and piecemeal fixes based on what the industry is willing to afford – does not effectively protect the public and water resources,” Gunter said. “Reactor systems carrying radioactive effluent can be controlled and monitored per their licensing agreements through defense-in-depth systems that are brought above grade and vaulted where they can be inspected, maintained, monitored and contained,” he said.

The tritium leak at Peach Bottom was measured at 37,700 picocuries per liter, considerably higher than the 20,000 picocuries per liter drinking water limit set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Inaccessible buried pipes and tanks carrying radioactive water, when allowed to corrode, crack and leak, represent a threat to groundwater resources and potentially a serious risk to human health.

Uncontrolled and unmonitored releases of radioactive isotopes migrating into the water table can remain dangerous for decades and longer.

Often, leaks are not detected until radioactive water percolates to the surface or is discovered in a limited number of onsite test wells, the Beyond Nuclear report found.

Repeated uncontrolled radioactive contamination of water and soil discovered after plant closure substantially increases reactor decommissioning and environmental cleanup costs already facing significant industry funding shortfalls.

“Today’s groundwater can be tomorrow’s drinking water,” Gunter concluded. “This uncontrolled problem can no longer be trivialized by industry and regulator leaving others to bear the consequences and costs.”

Read Leak First, Fix Later Executive Summary.

Read Leak First, Fix Later, full 2015 report.

Exelon’s “Special Report” to NRC, May 15, 2015. Radioactive Leak at Peach Bottom

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. The Beyond Nuclear team works with diverse partners and allies to provide the public, government officials, and the media with the critical information necessary to move humanity toward a world beyond nuclear. www.beyondnuclear.org.