The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has extended the operating licenses for 20 more years of FirstEnergy Corp.'s twin reactors in Shippingport, Pa., near East Liverpool, Ohio.

Beaver Valley 1 began operating in 1976. It can now run until 2036. Beaver Valley 2 began generating power in 1987 and can now operate until 2047. The two reactors generate more than 1,800 megawatts -- enough power to supply 1.4 million homes.

The license renewals come over the objections of two groups.

FirstEnergy CEO Anthony Alexander called the license renewals "an important milestone."

Nuclear power will be critical to helping the Akron-based utility deal with the restrictions on coal-fired power plants that Congress is considering. The company's four nuclear reactors represent 29 percent of its generating capacity.

Pittsburgh-based Citizen Power and D.C-based Beyond Nuclear, an anti-nuclear organization, opposed the renewals. Citizen Power argued that persistent corrosion problems in the steel walls lining the inside of the building that contains Beaver Valley 1 could become significant safety hazards if not thoroughly and regularly inspected.

The 3/8-inch thick steel walls must be leak-tight because radioactive gases could potentially permeate a reactor building's heavy, reinforced concrete outer walls in the event of an accident.

Inspectors found corrosion in the steel in 2006 and again in April of this year. The 2009 inspection found that rust
behind a paint bubble had eaten a hole, measuring one inch by three-eighths inch, completely through the steel.

Company inspectors found a block of wood between the steel wall and the poured concrete outer wall, left behind by a worker in the 1970s. That wood transferred moisture from the concrete to the steel, inspectors concluded.

Citizen Power demanded regular ultrasonic inspections of the entire steel lining in the huge building to find unseen corrosion.

NRC records show that the agency concluded the company's offer to use instruments to inspect a minimum of eight specific areas where rust might form and 75 randomly chosen one-foot square locations in the walls of both reactor buildings would be adequate to find any corrosion.

That's inadequate, said David Hughes, Citizen Power's executive director. "We don't think NRC should be extending this license until this very serious potential public safety problem is resolved."

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