—Slug:.....COMM-0844.vern.Good_Energy_VY

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—For section.....News

—Format.....News - byline and dateline

—Dateline.....Vernon

—Article Number:.....42766

Notes from editor (not for publication):

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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Panels explore new approach to storage of spent nuclear waste

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A think tank comes to Vernon to explore how the federal government might work with communities to build a waste storage facility — this time, with the consent of those who might be affected

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TEXT BODY:

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On a chilly November afternoon, people representing organizations across Windham County filed through the door to Vernon's Governor Hunt House Community Center.

Inside, staff of the Good Energy Collective (GEC), a think tank and research organization based in Sacramento, California, greeted participants who had come to help researchers answer a question: “Can siting for nuclear waste facilities truly be community-centric?”

As the participants headed toward a table filled with coffee and sandwiches, they paused to read flyers tacked to bulletin boards about present-day Vernon: yoga classes, bone builders, and Bingo night.

Outside, a steady rhythm of clangs and bangs from heavy equipment echoed from the former Vermont Yankee nuclear power station as contractors carried on decommissioning the dormant plant.

Entergy, Vermont Yankee’s former owner, donated the historic Governor Hunt House, previously used as office space for the plant, to the community as a parting gift in 2020 when it sold Vermont Yankee to NorthStar for decommissioning.

One workshop participant noted that the Governor Hunt House felt to her like the only tangible community asset left from the more than 40 years that VY operated.

On Nov. 20 and 21, two cohorts of community members attended the workshops, part of an initiative of the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), which has contracted with 12 consortia to conduct the research on designing an effective process for communities interested in hosting a site for spent nuclear fuel.

The DOE says it is developing a set of evidence-based guidelines for “a collaborative process that would enable the successful siting of a federal consolidated storage facility (CSF) for spent nuclear fuel.”

In a news release in 2024, the federal agency said a CSF would initially store 15,000 metric tons of spent nuclear fuel.

Describing itself as “making the progressive case for nuclear energy in a just, climate-friendly future,” the organization

takes the position that "nuclear energy has a vital role to play in a just energy transition."

The organization believes that key to the ideal process of addressing the nuclear waste issue is fostering partnership and collaboration between a potential host community and the DOE.

"At GEC, we put communities at the center of our research and policy work because understanding local perspectives is essential to advancing nuclear energy thoughtfully and effectively," the organization wrote.

Yucca Mountain repository site in limbo

The DOE, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and other federal agencies have been sued over the government's failure to fulfill its obligation to take nuclear waste.

A site at Yucca Mountain in Nevada was proposed in 1987 and approved by Congress in 2002. But with development of the country's single centralized spent-fuel storage site having reached a standstill, the DOE has shifted its focus to the creation of one or more CSFs, explained GEC's executive director, Erik Funkhouser.

The shift came after a 2012 Blue Ribbon Commission recommended that the U.S. seek a site to replace Yucca Mountain and apply a collaborative-based siting model to the process.

Rather than identify a site and develop it from top-down seizing of property, the commission urged what the DOE calls a "consent-based process" — for communities, industry, government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations to work together in the process to develop a solution with far less rancor.

Currently, 70 temporary storage sites host spent nuclear fuel in the country, he added, but managing the waste is "unwieldy" and raises national security concerns.

On day 1 of the workshop, participants answered survey questions that gauged their thoughts and feelings about nuclear issues. They also discussed the risks and benefits of hosting a CSF and what participating in a siting process might entail for the potential host community.

The groups ended the day outlining principles and guidelines to steer a siting process.

Day 2 included a dive into community engagement issues, including effective trust-building and information-sharing methods.

Participants worked through an ideal governance structure and a model to gauge a community's interest in hosting a CSF.

As the workshop progressed, participants also dove into what structure a potential siting should take and the types of information that communities would need to make a decision.

Participants looked at the DOE's process outline and shared thoughts on what steps they thought it missed and what groups — federal, state, community, consultants — should take responsibility for different tasks.

As these conversations unfolded, participants raised concerns — like how to ensure that all community members are heard. Some people may not trust that the federal or state governments will treat local communities fairly, they pointed out, and some members may outright reject nuclear power and its waste. Still others may care only about what deal they can get for their town, they said.

Participants suggested that the community and its trusted partners — for example, consultants, planning commissions, and the state — have the most input at the beginning and end of the vetting process. Technical issues such as conducting environmental impact studies, preparing technical outlines, or conducting economic studies should fall under the purview of the federal or state government, the groups concluded.

With a waste product like spent fuel, which has a half-life of thousands of years, workshop participants said the community engagement should not stop at the yes-no decision of becoming a host community.

The process also needed to allow for communities to renegotiate their agreement with the DOE. As nuclear technology improved, host communities should be able to receive upgrades at their spent fuel pads, the participants concluded.

Another suggestion from Vernon's workshop participants was to fund an ombudsperson to represent the community.

One participant said he felt the outlined process would push communities to say yes. What was built into the system to help communities decide no, if that was what was right for them? he asked.

Throughout the workshops, GEC staff oversaw discussions and facilitated activities.

Viewing nuclear power as 'essential'

Since its founding in 2020, GEC has received multiple grants related to nuclear energy and climate change, including a $600,000 grant from the MacArthur Foundation to address nuclear issues.

Given the scope of issues around the energy grid and climate resilience, why is GEC putting all its ducks behind nuclear?

The first reason, Funkhouser said, is that "there's a lot of eyes on the other areas, and not enough people watching the till for nuclear."

After the workshop ended, he added that GEC wants to see nuclear done safely. He said the organization defines itself as progressive and seeks a responsible decarbonization of the energy grid that doesn't leave any communities behind.

"We also think that some of the affordability and responsibility around decarbonization itself were really overlooked — or have been until probably recently," he said.

He believes that core marginalized communities in the U.S. and abroad are especially vulnerable "when it comes to increasing power prices, increasing risks in the grid."

Funkhouser has written that "nuclear energy is essential to decarbonizing the power sector, and meaningful community buy-in is indispensable — and achievable. We believe firmly that the United States can do both."

In his opinion, nuclear is one of only a few energy sources — such as geothermal, hydro, and total carbon capture natural gas — that are clean sources that can be accessed anytime they are needed to meet demand.

Funkhouser added that he believes that ensuring a steady baseload power source is one of the necessary ways to avoid "one of the biggest social problems in the energy transition itself."

"Renewables are doing well, but we have to have base load until we can get seasonal storage figured out," he added.

According to Funkhouser, GEC and the other 12 members of the consortia have agreed to different scopes of work with the DOE. GEC has undergone a "piloting" phase of its work with the department, where "we were making sure that the ideas we had for how to bring these insights out were going to be robust in practice."

The workshops represent "the end of the final stage of that," he said.

GEC went through a few steps to find workshop participants.

For the first cohort of the day, the organization recruited people it learned about during the piloting phase. For the second group, staff used what Funkhouser described as a "spatial map" to identify potential participants from throughout the area based on randomized addresses in towns whose ZIP codes fall within a 10-mile radius of Brattleboro.

From there, GEC invited a small sample group.

Attendees were compensated $540 to participate in the workshop.

Small community, big memories

Vernon's nuclear history filtered through the conversations. The plant may be closed, but some residents shared their memories as a host community.

Participants listed some positive memories — the money the plant invested into the community, time spent with neighbors who worked at VY, and how the plant gave the town an identity.

Negative memories also emerged: weathering the opinions and ire of people who did not even live in Vernon; what they characterized as the meddling of state and federal officials with their own agendas; and municipal decisions arrived at after deep study — say, by the planning commission — going ignored by "everyone else."

For people not at the workshops, Funkhouser said, it's important to understand that the sessions served solely to gather information and not as part of a DOE process to select or vet prospective communities for storing nuclear waste as a CSF.

In fact, the town already hosts the spent fuel left from VY's operation, he pointed out.

Funkhouser also hoped the Vernon community understands that it is unique: For most areas with current or former nuclear plants, those operations have large footprints and are located near other institutions — such as a naval base. They generally are found within communities of 600,000 people.

The VY region is small in comparison — between 45,000 and 50,000 people live in all of Windham County, according to U.S. census estimates.

Yet Vernon and the surrounding communities are highly organized in their knowledge and attitudes toward nuclear power, Funkhouser said.

As the workshop wrapped at the end of the second day, he commented that it was a pleasure working with everyone and he appreciated the local depth of knowledge of nuclear issues and appreciated how seriously participants took the process, as well as their insight into what a community-based process would look like.

Funkhouser noted that Vernon was a unique place to hold this conversation, as it has already experienced hosting a nuclear power plant and still does so for Vermont Yankee's spent fuel.

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