

## **No, the sky is not falling**

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When passengers walk through airport security at Burlington's International Airport, they are scanned by x-rays and the amount of radiation is about 0.015 millirem. Our bodies naturally receive about 360 millirems annually. It's so small we don't think about it.

But when Vermont Yankee Friday announced that it had detected tritium levels of 1,040 picocuries per liter, Vermont's political world broke into a panic. Peter Shumlin, the Democratic nominee for governor, said: "This is the worst man-made environmental disaster, in my judgment, in the history of this state." Brian Dubie, the Republican nominee for governor, said he wants new assurances from the state and the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission that the plant is safe to operate.

Fair enough. It's incumbent upon Vermont Yankee to keep the public informed and it's axiomatic that its safety is assured.

But it's also critical that Vermonters be given the necessary perspective and that we not follow "leaders" who seek votes by scaring the public.

For perspective, that 1,040 picocuries per liter level contains less than one-tenth the amount of radiation we receive in that round-trip airline ride.

It is 100 times less than the dose you get with x-rays at the dentist's office.

It is 10,000 times less than the radiation you get when you go to the hospital for a CT scan.

By law, Vermont Yankee does not have to report tritium levels to the NRC unless they are 30,000 picocuries per liter. The U.S. Environmental Agency's standard for acceptable levels of tritium in drinking water is 20,000 picocuries per liter.

Vermont Yankee's reported amount was 1,040 picocuries per liter. It was found in a drinking well that had been abandoned last February. It does not represent a new leak. Further, Vermont Yankee had to drill 200 feet down, and collect water for over 48 hours to gather a sample large enough to detect the 1,040 picocuries per liter. Obviously, that's a small amount of water.

There is a visceral reaction to any announcement of any leak of something radioactive. That's why it's easy for Mr. Shumlin to run around like Chicken Little screaming that the sky is falling. The public has no perspective as to what's dangerous and what's not. It's easier to inflame the public than to inform, and that's the path Mr. Shumlin has chosen.

Obviously, nuclear power plants have a higher standard to meet than other energy producers and the goal is to have no leaks of any variety. That's common sense. But if we are to have a reasonable and productive debate as to the state's energy future we need leaders willing to bring an honest perspective to the various options before us.

It's not honest to scare Vermonters into thinking that Friday's announced tritium levels pose a threat to the public's safety. They do not. The 1,040 picocurie per liter level represents 5 percent of the 20,000 picocurie level the EPA says is safe enough to drink.

In other words, by EPA's definition, it would have been completely safe to drink the sample tested by Vermont Yankee.

It would be a travesty if the state's energy policy were based on such ill-informed conclusions. Vermont Yankee represents a third of our baseload power. If the plant is shutdown in 2012, then we will be forced to shift to the region's power grid for replacement power. That power will not be as environmentally friendly as Vermont Yankee. Over the long term it will become more expensive. It will also increase our dependency on fossil fuels.

The sad irony would be inescapable: As a state, we are particularly interested in an energy future that uses less carbon, yet this would push us dramatically in the opposite direction. As a state, and a nation, we are interested in freeing ourselves from the geopolitical ramifications of depending on other nations for our fuel, yet closing down Vermont Yankee would make us more dependent, not less.

The counter to this, of course, is the claim that we will make up the difference through conservation and renewable energy sources. We won't. For perspective, as Tom Evslin points out in a Vermont Tiger post titled "Scale Matters", the world's largest offshore wind farm just became operational off the coast of England. It's 13.5 square miles in size, or 8,640 acres [6.6 times the size of St. Albans City.] It would produce about 15 percent of the energy produced by Vermont Yankee.

The energy debate ahead is pivotal for the State of Vermont. The outcome will contribute in no small part to our economic prosperity. Vermonters should ask their candidates to provide the perspective essential for this debate. Screaming that the sky is about to fall plays to the lowest common denominator tactic, something we should find objectionable.