

News from Beyond Nuclear and Nuclear Energy Information Service (NEIS)

For Immediate Release, Tuesday, December 11, 2012

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Critics charge “Nukespeak” downplays Palisades atomic reactor’s catastrophic risks “Blinky B’Lingo” Game Played at NRC Meeting

Covert, MI—The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and Entergy are accused of routinely engaging in "Nukespeak" to downplay worsening risks at the problem-plagued Palisades atomic reactor. Concerned local residents and environmental watchdogs highlighted the language used by the NRC and Entergy at a public meeting in South Haven Tuesday evening. While NRC and Entergy purported to discuss “Palisades Corrective Actions and NRC Oversight,” the critics played a game of “Nukespeak B’Lingo,” to call attention to euphemisms and jargon that serve to deceive and conceal alarming accidents and breakdowns at the age-degraded reactor, which is deep into its breakdown phase.

"NRC's been playing word games with the public all along; now it's our turn! Come join the fun!" urged David Kraft, executive director of Nuclear Energy Information Service of Illinois.

At a May 25, 2012 meeting in South Haven with NRC’s then-Chairman, Dr. Greg Jaczko, Kraft warned that a so-called “energy excursion” or “transient” (meltdown or catastrophic radioactivity release) at Palisades could ruin Lake Michigan – the drinking water supply for Chicago, and for 40 million North Americans downstream throughout the Great Lakes in 8 U.S. states, 2 Canadian provinces, and a large number of Native American First Nations.

Despite his touring Palisades that day, NRC Staff and Entergy concealed from NRC Chairman Jaczko an ongoing, year-long water leak into “leakage control equipment” and “catch basins” (also known as buckets, pails, and plastic bottles) in the safety-critical control room, near vulnerable electrical circuitry. Thus, 25 concerned local residents and environmental group representatives, as well as the news media, assembled for the Chairman’s visit and press conference, were kept in the dark as well. A few weeks later, U.S. Rep. Ed Markey (D-MA), prompted by Palisades whistleblower revelations, made the leak public. The whistleblower(s) also revealed that “safety culture” at Palisades was in complete collapse, with the workforce at all levels, including management, reluctant to raise safety issues, for fear of reprisal, and doubtful that anything good would come of it.

At a September 12th NRC public meeting in South Haven about the meltdown of safety culture at Palisades, Entergy spoke of “WIGs,” or “Wildly Important Goals” supposedly intended to restore it.

Alice Hirt of Don’t Waste Michigan in Holland commented that Entergy’s “WIGs” were little more than a “wildly insulting gimmick.”

“We have grown increasingly frustrated by our ongoing correspondence with the NRC Chairman’s office,” said Bette Pierman, a concerned Benton Harbor resident. “NRC Chairwoman Allison Macfarlane and her Staff’s responses to us have been insultingly shallow, vague, self-contradictory, and side-step our concerns. Despite NRC’s best attempts at ‘linguistic detoxification’, we are more alarmed than ever.”

“Since NRC and Entergy regularly use deceptive lingo, we decided to call our game Nukespeak B’Lingo,” said Kevin Kamps of Beyond Nuclear, a 20-year watchdog on Palisades. “And since Palisades imitates *The Simpson’s*, we could also call it Blinky B’Lingo.”

“NRC claims to exercise ‘relentless oversight’ at Palisades,” Kamps said. “But NRC routinely overlooks risks, leading to endless breakdowns that invite catastrophe.”

After 5 “unplanned shutdowns” (unexpected, sudden breakdowns that forced emergency reactor SCRAMs*) in 2011 -- including a “Yellow finding” (“of substantial safety significance”) due to a near-electrocution that cut off power to half the control room and brought multiple plant safety systems to the breaking point -- NRC designated Palisades as having a “degraded cornerstone” (meaning they regarded it as one of the four worst-run reactors in the country). Despite a long litany of diverse “events” (various leaks, some repeated over the course of 40 years) in 2012, NRC has restored its top-notch safety status designation on Palisades.

At a congressional hearing this summer, U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Fred Upton (R-St. Joe) put pressure on NRC Commissioners to restore Palisades’ top-notch safety status as soon as possible, despite continuous press-reported serious problems. NRC obliged a month ago. Upton oversees NRC activities and funding levels. Entergy Nuclear, the second largest nuclear utility in the U.S., was one of Upton’s top campaign contributors in his recent successful run for another term in Congress.

“Just as we’ve seen in Japan, the collusion extends to the top. Ordinary citizens must do what the federal government’s supposed safety regulator refuses to do – shutdown Palisades before it melts down,” said Michael Keegan of Coalition for a Nuclear-Free Great Lakes. “The risky game of radioactive Russian roulette must end. We cannot risk any more spins of the wheel of misfortune. Palisades is a house of cards.”

“Nukespeak,” alluding to “Newspeak” in Orwell’s novel *1984*, was the title of a 1982 book by Hilgartner, Bell, and O’Connor. “Nukespeak” was updated and republished several months after the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe began in 2011.

As Rory O'Connor wrote in "No Word for Meltdown: The Return of Nukespeak" on March 15, 2011, a few days after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear catastrophe began:

"A Google search for the past month showed more than 1.93 billion hits for 'meltdown.' Yet the regulators at the NRC remain wary of listing the word that everyone else in the world uses to summarize the full horror of what will ensue if uranium fuel at the core of a commercial nuclear power plant is left uncooled long enough for it to melt. It's no surprise, since the nuclear industry's proponents speak a different language than the rest of us, a special language where euphemism and obfuscation reign, as we first pointed out thirty years ago in our book *Nukespeak: Nuclear Language, Myths, and Mindset*. Nukespeak is the language of the nuclear mindset — the worldview or system of beliefs of nuclear developers and enthusiasts, to whom there are never any accidents — only 'events' or 'incidents', 'abnormal evolutions and normal aberrations', or 'plant transients.'"

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*SCRAM is short for "Safety Control Rod Axe Man," a phrase originating at Enrico Fermi's Chicago Pile-1 atomic reactor at the University of Chicago, which achieved a 28 minute long self-sustaining chain reaction on December 2, 1942 as part of the Manhattan Project that led to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, less than three years later. One of Fermi's graduate students stood with an axe next to a rope, looped over a pulley, which held a control rod above the prototype reactor. If an emergency had occurred, the SCRAM was to chop the rope, to drop the control rod into the reactor. The term has stuck to the present day, although the procedure has been automated.