By Susan Smallheer, Rutland Herald

The level of radioactive tritium is continuing to rise in the monitoring well at Vermont Yankee, and is now just below reportable drinking water standards, a representative from Entergy Nuclear said Friday.

The level of tritium in the well was measured Thursday at 19,800 picocuries per liter, up from the 17,000 picocuries per liter last week, according to Robert Williams, spokesman for Entergy Nuclear.

Williams said the new reading was still below reportable limits by 200 picocuries per liter. The federal Environmental Protection Agency has set a standard of 20,000 picocuries per liter.

The level of tritium in the well has steadily risen since mid-November, when a test first showed tritium. The November level was 700 parts per liter, and then jumped to 17,000 and 14,500 parts per liter in two tests last week.

Williams stressed that the water in the monitoring well was not drinking water, and he said Entergy has continued to test the Connecticut River, but no tritium was detected in the river.

The source of the tritium remains a mystery, and the company said it would drill seven new monitoring wells at different locations at the Vernon reactor in an attempt to locate the source of the radioactive leak.

Meanwhile, Vermont's three-man congressional delegation said late Friday it wanted the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to undertake an investigation of Entergy's lack of disclosure and misleading information about the potential for radioactive contamination from buried underground pipes.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., Sen. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., and Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., issued a joint statement Friday afternoon saying they wanted the NRC to do a "thorough investigation into whether there was any attempt by Vermont Yankee officials to mislead state officials regarding the plant's safety and underground piping."

Underground piping has been a source of radioactive contamination at other nuclear power plants, and in fact, there was already some underground contamination at the Vernon reactor, which had already been cleaned up.

"Please also determine whether information provided by Entergy to the NRC has been accurate, complete and consistent with that provided to the state of Vermont," the congressional delegation's statement said.

"We hope you can pinpoint exactly what Entergy knew about the extent of their underground piping and this leak, and when they knew it," the statement said.

Welch also will join three other House members, including Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., and two New York congressmen, in asking for the General Accounting Office to investigate the NRC's handling of the underground piping problem at nuclear plants around the country, according to Welch's spokesman Paul Heintz.

Currently there are about a dozen reactors with underground radioactive leaks.

Entergy Nuclear officials have said they learned about their tritium contamination in November, but waited for confirmatory tests to release the information publicly.

Jay Thayer, Entergy Nuclear's Vermont vice president for operations, said Friday it was his fault he gave misinformation under oath to the Public Service Board last May, during hearings on whether Vermont Yankee should be relicensed for another 20 years of operation.

Thayer told the board there were no buried underground pipes containing radioactivity, a fact that has been proven false in the past week, since the tritium contamination became public.

But Thayer said Entergy Nuclear staff had given Nuclear Safety Associates, a Philadelphia consulting firm, the correct and complete information about the network of underground pipes at Vermont Yankee in 2008. NSA used the information as part of the Act 189 review of the plant, which resulted in a report last March from the Oversight Panel that Vermont Yankee could continue operating for another 20 years, given a long list of improvements.

"It was human error," Thayer said, noting that Vermont Yankee has a comprehensive plan of all the underground pipes at the plant.

Since the tritium problem first surfaced last week, Entergy has identified several pipes that carry radioactive properties, including a two-inch pressurized pipe.

Neil Sheehan, a spokesman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said the commission would work with the congressional delegation to address its concerns.