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NRC to Indian Point: "You're safe" but doesn't support ISA

New leak, siren failure a concern

By Abby Luby



Members of the carpenters and joiners union descend on Colonial Terrace in Cortlandt for the NRC's annual assessment meeting.

Entergy's application to renew their operating licensing for the two Indian Point nuclear reactors was filed on the heels of a lukewarm performance assessment by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission at its annual assessment meeting April 26 in Cortlandt.

As the federal oversight agency, the NRC assessed the plant's current operation as being safe, giving Entergy a green rating. NRC assessments only rate operating components and personnel within the plants.

However the NRC especially noted, and said it will continue to monitor, Entergy's frequent unplanned shutdowns at the plant and the company's policy dealing with plant workers who want to address safety issues without fear of reprimand.

NRC: ISA unnecessary

During last week's public comment period, Lori Hall Armstrong, a representative of Governor Eliot Spitzer, read a letter written earlier that day from the chief executive to NRC chairman Dale Klein urging the agency to support an independent safety assessment (ISA) before it considers extending Entergy's operating license for another 20 years.

NRC Regional Director Sam Collins, who was leading the assessment meeting for the NRC, disagreed that an independent study would add any new information about the plant. "We've already put in 13,000 hours of inspections in 2006 and will be doing the same next year," he said. "A (independent assessment) review like this is too resource intensive to be productive and our assessments are more responsive."

Spitzer said in his letter that he applauded the efforts of Senators Clinton and Schumer for co-sponsoring a house bill calling for the ISA.

Mark Jacobs, of the Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition, blamed the NRC for not fining Entergy enough for failing to have a new siren system fully operative by the NRC deadline. Congress passed a law in 2005 requiring the NRC to force Entergy to install a backup system to the already troubled emergency siren system. Instead Entergy spent about \$50 million on an entire

new system to be in place by January 30, 2007.

Entergy not only missed the January deadline, but they missed the extended deadline of April 15, 2007 as well. At the assessment meeting Michael Slobodien, Entergy's director of emergency planning, said the problem was in one tower in Westchester where the radio transmitter was malfunctioning. The federal regulation requires a fine of \$130,000 per violation per day. The NRC proposed only a one-time fine of \$130,000.

"You need to fine Entergy \$130,000 a day until the sirens work," said Jacobs. "When you do that, they'll find the problem."

Jacobs faulted the NRC by saying "the public feels the NRC is not really doing your job. I think NRC really means not requiring corrections."

"We align ourselves to what's happening at the plant," Collins responded to Jacobs. "We want to be responsive but we have limits."

A new Tritium leak

Days before the NRC assessment meeting, steam containing tritium was found escaping from the ground near Indian Point unit 3. Tritium is a radioactive isotope that becomes part of water and has a half-life of 12.3 years. Although it increases the risk of developing cancer, it is considered one of the least dangerous radionuclides.

According to Don Mayer, director of special projects at Entergy, the steam was coming from an eight-inch pipe some five feet below the ground.

"We have fully contained the wisps of steam that have surfaced on the asphalt," said Mayer, indicating that the pipe, part of a closed heating system, is under about 50 pounds of pressure. The pipe is believed to be used to transfer steam from one unit to the next. Mayer didn't know if the pipe had been underutilized before the leak.

"We will be excavating the pipe soon and see how big the leak actually is, but we're speculating that it can't be more than a pin-size hole," Mayer added.

NRC inspector Mark Cox, who works on site at the plants, said there was no indication that the leak was the result of seismic activity since there had been no recent seismic reports. Cox also said there were no devices at Indian Point to monitor seismic activity.

Just how long the steam has been leaking is unknown.

Collins said the leak was so minimal that it was beyond the purview of the NRC.

"This type of event is not usually reported to the NRC," said Collins. "But I understand that as the steam goes into the air, it is not a health threat."

an Hirsch, president of the nuclear watchdog group, Committee to Bridge the Gap, said tritium doesn't dissipate or disappear. Hirsch oversees health studies regarding the effects of radiation that come from nuclear power plants.

"Tritium, when released into the environment, will remain there for about 250 years before one can say it has decayed away," explained Hirsch. "Releasing tritiated water into the environment ends up as tritiated liquid water in streams, rivers, and groundwater."

Just how much tritium has been released is also unknown. Hirsch said the basic rule is to avoid uncontrolled releases of radioactivity into the environment. "A second rule is you don't want surprises. Previously undiscovered and unpermitted leaks of radioactivity are a no-no in radiation protection."