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PANEL DISCUSSES INDIAN POINT LEAKS

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About Those Leaks...

By Abby Luby



Congressman John Hall (inset) at the Indian Point Round Table Briefing last week

For over a decade radioactive water has been leaking from spent fuel pools at the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant in Buchanan.

Newer leaks reported 18 months ago indicated that irradiated water from the pools had found its way into the ground water and the Hudson River. It's been difficult for Entergy, the plant owner, to pin down where the leaks are coming from. Tritium laced water is suspected of leaking from Unit 2; tritium is another dangerous radioactive isotope.

More recently, fish in the Hudson River were found to have traces of strontium-90, one of the radioactive isotopes leaking from the plant.

Uncertainty about the leaks motivated the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, the Pace Academy for the Environment and the Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition to present a roster of politicians, scientists, health and environmental officials to shed some light on the situation.

Last Friday afternoon and evening, some 200 people came to Willcox Gymnasium at Pace University in Pleasantville to hear the panel address concerns and answer questions about the leaks. Speakers included Representatives Nita Lowey and John Hall, state Assemblyman Richard Brodsky and Westchester County Legislator Michael Kaplowitz. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the federal oversight agency for nuclear power plants, and Entergy was not represented.

Expanded testing announced

Dr. Ward Stone, a state wildlife pathologist, announced plans to test more aquatic life in the Hudson River next to the plant. Stone will cage fish and track the movement of radionuclides into the river.

"I will be taking care of the fish over a period of time and seeing what they pick up," said Stone. "I will also be testing turtles because they stay in the same place year after year and hold radionuclides very well."

Stone will also test frogs, mollusks, clams, oysters, aquatic insects, nesting birds and various wildlife near the

plant. Testing will start this spring, he said.

Barbara Youngberg, the director of the Environmental Radiation Bureau at the state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), said the agency will also expand their testing program in the Hudson River. "Our testing program will be in addition to what they [Entergy] usually do. We will start this spring."

Officials will also be working with fish biologists.

"We will look further upstream and expand the types of fish we test," he said. "We will split samples of fish bones we take with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), said the DEC's Jim Rice. Rice added that they were looking for additional data from fish that don't have a large migration pattern in the river. Experts will be looking at commercial and recreational fish.

More testing needed

Entergy is currently required by the NRC to sample fish only twice a year. When asked if she thought this amount of testing was adequate, Youngberg said "no."

Dr. Adela Salame-Alfie, the director of the Bureau of Environmental Radiation Protection with the New York State Department of Health (DOH), said water samples around the plant didn't show anything significant.

"Samples we have collected around Indian Point is by no means an extensive program because the utility runs their own surveillance," said Salame-Alfie. "We just check for discrepancies."

The Department of Health takes air samples once a week and collects water samples near Verplanck and from the plant's discharge canal into the Hudson. Fish samples are collected once a year and there are four locations where external radiation is measured, Salame-Alfie said.

Mark Jacobs, of the Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition, asked whether the Department of Health is analyzing the low-level radiation released from Indian Point on a weekly basis to see if they are causing any health impact. "I'm not in the cancer program and don't know if there is a plan to study that," said Salame-Alfie. "Communities interested in cancer study can request the (department) look at all the cancers that were reported in a specific area and create a pathology report. But an in-depth study takes years."

Last fall ground water sampled within 150 feet of the Hudson River measured strontium-90 at three times the amount allowed in drinking water. The dangerous radioactive isotope is linked to bone cancer and leukemia. Youngberg said that the DEC sampled the surface and sediment of the river and nearby streams for strontium-90.

"Strontium-90 is ubiquitous in the environment," said Youngberg. "It's from the atmospheric weapons tests in the 1950's. "The strontium-90 numbers from Indian Point are not markedly different from the ones we see from elsewhere."

Currently, concentrations of strontium-90 going into the Hudson River are not extremely high, according to Youngberg. "The fish results did not show a connection between Indian Point," she explained. There is no sign of any impacts offsite but we will stay involved."

Representatives comment

Congressman Hall (D-Dover Plains) said he was concerned about communities north of Indian Point that got their drinking water from the Hudson River.

"In drought years the salt wedge (where the saline percentage starts to drop and the water becomes fresh water) is drawn from the lower levels in the Hudson River as far down as the Chelsea Station in New York City. Since Indian Point is 35 miles from New York City, one might presume that strontium-90 and tritium is reaching as far as Kingston. This deserves a look."

"I'm pleased that the DEC is going to do further studies," said Nita Lowey (D-White Plains). "In Rockland we are concerned about the proposed desalinization plant by United Water and for those who fish in the Hudson River." Lashing out at the improbability of the evacuation plan was Assemblyman Richard Brodsky (D-Westchester). The current plan, which the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) says will work, is based on a time estimate study from 1994 and a traffic study that used demographic information from 1990. FEMA claims that the plan would successfully evacuate 300,000 residents in two hours, but a 2001 NRC study claims that a meltdown could release large amounts of radiation from a site in as little as an hour.

Stating his respect for the work of the DEC and the Health Department, Brodsky blamed FEMA for certifying the evacuation plan.

"Certifying the evacuation plan was an embarrassment," he said. "There's no shortage of regulations, there is a shortage of resources and a shortage of political will. If anyone really wants to shut the plant, it won't be because of the leaks. Shutting down this plant will be because of the absurdity of the evacuation plan."