



Angry Crowd Drowns Out NRC

By Abby Luby

Cortlandt, NY -- Twenty minutes after the Nuclear Regulatory began their 2010 annual safety assessment of the Indian Point Nuclear power plants, a riled up crowd of over 600 people started to vent their anger, demanding the NRC shut down the twin reactors in Buchanan. Held last Thursday night, the standing room only crowd filled Colonial Terrace's Banquet Hall with anti nuclear placards and signs, many waving red letter "F's" signifying an alternative grade on plant safety.



Paul Gally of Riverkeeper addressing the press before the formal NRC Meeting

Prior to the meeting, NRC spokesperson Diane Screnci said that, in light of the Fukushima disasters at the Daiichi nuclear power plants in March, the agency intentionally planned a shortened version of the safety assessment in order to hear public concerns. Unlike previous years, Entergy, the owner of Indian Point, was not sitting opposite the six person NRC panel. Entergy's Jerry Nappi, said the utility company wasn't asked to contribute to the safety assessment meeting "But we are here if anyone has any questions."



NRC Deputy Regional Administrator David Lew

Two press conferences were held prior to the meeting, one by the NRC and the other by anti-nuclear groups. NRC Deputy Regional Administrator David Lew told the media about basic inspection processes since Fukushima. When asked specifically about lessons learned from the Japanese disaster, Lew said the NRC was just gathering information that would be later integrated in their review processes. Interestingly, Lew had

little or no response when asked about the NRC's inspection report completed last month entitled "Follow Up to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Station Fuel Damage Event." The report said that hydrogen recombiners in Units 2 had not been tested for a number of years which is a violation of federal regulations. But recombiners in Unit 3 had been tested, and worked. Hydrogen recombiners eliminate explosive hydrogen - the gas that exploded and blew up the outer containments of three reactors at the Fukushima. The NRC neglected to penalize Entergy for not testing Unit 2 recombiners. Lew was unable to explain the discrepancy.

"There are still lessons to be learned," he intoned. "When equipment is not inspected we go back to the fundamental mission to assess the significant issues."

Lew also fended off questions on evacuation plans, especially since the NRC advised Americans near the highly radioactive Fukushima plant to evacuate at least 50 miles away, advice inconsistent with the ten mile safety distance the NRC tells U.S. citizens.



Audience and NRC members at the Indian Point annual safety assessment meeting

Lew said although the NRC is looking at emergency preparedness, FEMA, (Federal Emergency Management Agency) has final say on evacuation plans. "At this time, the issue is not significant enough to look at," he said. "The NRC doesn't deal with policy. Our only mission is to make sure that nuclear power plants are safe."

A large coalition of anti-nuclear groups from the Hudson Valley and from New York City held their press conference outside on the expansive lawn at Colonial Terrace and included two bus loads of coalition members from New York City. The organizations, seeking to close Indian Point included Citizens Awareness Network, Greenpeace, Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition (IPSEC), New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG), Riverkeeper and Shut Down Indian Point Now, a new group recently formed in New York City.

Standing in front of the large group brandishing anti Indian Point signs and T-shirts, Gary Shaw from the Croton Close Indian Point group said "When a nuclear plant goes bust, it's a global issue, not a local issue. The NRC is not doing their job of protecting the public, they are simply enablers of the [nuclear] industry."

At the formal assessment meeting, the NRC panel of inspectors were frequently interrupted by jeers and outbursts accusing the agency of neglecting to protect the public

from potential dangers at Indian Point. The panel was forced to break for ten minutes after which Lew decided to cut the NRC presentation short so the public could speak.

The one standing ovation of the evening was for Westchester Legislator Michael Kaplowitz, (D, I-Somers), Chairman of the Westchester County Board of Legislators Committee on Environment & Energy.

“When regulators insulate and disengage themselves from the people, bad things happen. You, the NRC, are the only New York body we have to protect us.”

Kaplowitz has repeatedly invited the NRC to join his regular meetings, “Plan, Don’t Panic,” to address nuclear plant operation and emergency preparedness since the Fukushima crises. The NRC has refused to attend the meetings, but after hearing Kaplowitz’s invite again on Thursday night, they told him they would “Take his requests under advisement.” The crowd, clamoring to their feet chanted “Tell him ‘Yes!’”

Indian Point owner Entergy has applied to extend their operating license for 20 more years until 2033 and 2035 for each unit. The application is currently before the Atomic Safety and Licensing Board who are considering contentions to re-licensing by Riverkeeper, New York State and Clearwater.

Environmental Director Manna Jo Greene of Clearwater asked the NRC to suspend the re-licensing process until more is learned about Fukushima. “We need a period of introspection. We need a moratorium,” she said.

About 30 people from New York City SHARE, Safe, Healthy, Affordable and Reliable Energy, sat quietly in the back holding small signs in favor of nuclear power. The organization fears alternative energy sources will drive up the price of electricity.

Over 90 people signed up to speak. Canem Ozyildirim, 24, the representative for the New York Chapter of Greenpeace, said she was disappointed that few young people were at the meeting. “My personal goal is to bring people my age to meetings like this.”

Speaking in favor of re-licensing Indian Point was Jerry Connelly, spokesperson for the Coalition of Labor for Energy & Jobs. Connelly turned around to face the crowd.

“If the air conditioning goes off here tonight, it’s what you have to get used to if Indian Point is shut down,” he told the hostile audience. “You will have to change your life style. That’s the way it is.”



The audience at Thursday's Indian Point annual safety assessment

New York City resident Chris Williams, who is an author and physics professor at Pace University argued against the plant's actual electrical output. "We don't need Indian Point, we only use five percent of the power. Nuclear power is dangerous and unsafe."

Former state Assemblyman Jerry Kremer, head of New York AREA, a pro-Indian Point group, addressed the NRC panel. "Every one of you are being abused but somebody has to do the tough job with integrity and honesty – which you do. I respect what you are trying to do."

Other speakers included famed musician and composer David Amram, Rockland Assemblywoman Ellen Jaffee, D-Suffern, spokespersons for Congresswoman Nita Lowey, Congressman Eliot Engel and US Senator Kirsten Gillibrand.

When asked about the status of Entergy's relicensing application NRC project manager Drew Stuyvenberg said it was currently under review by the Atomic Safety and Licensing Board for review.

"There will be a legal proceeding and the board controls that. Our staff can't give a definitive answer about when that proceeding will be - it might be in December (2011) or January (2012). But the board has changed the time line before."