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Federal Review Board scrutinizes Indian Point leaks

By Abby Luby

BUCHANAN - An independent federal review board of nuclear energy experts are raising concerns about leaks at the Indian Point Nuclear Power plants.

Appearing before the Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards (ACRS) last week in Rockville, Maryland was Entergy, the owner of Indian Point, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which is reviewing the utility's current license renewal application.

Questions asked were based on the NRC's draft Safety Evaluation Report (SERS) for Indian Point, a lengthy report that is integral to the license renewal process. Entergy applied in April 2007 to extend their operating license for 20 years for Units 2 and 3.

Entergy executives said that a 40-gallon-per-minute leak regularly occurs at the Unit 2 reactor during refueling outages, the bi-yearly replacement of uranium fuel rods in the reactor core. During the month-long process water leaks out and down the steel liner that surrounds the reactors in the containment building which is constructed with 4-6 feet thick concrete walls.

"You have a defective condition that can worsen at any time? For me that's troublesome," said Charles Brown, Jr., an ACRS board member with over 35 years of experience in reactor plant engineering.

The leaks come from welds made to install the steel liner when Unit 2 was built in 1972. Water leaking out contains highly corrosive boric acid (used in reactor cooling water) and could corrode the thick metal structural components inside the containment building.

In 2002, boric acid ate its way through 6 inches of the reactor head at the Davis-Besse nuclear power plant in Ohio, temporarily closing the plant for 14 months.

"The leaks are coming out of more than one location," said Fred Dacimo, Entergy's top manager overseeing the company's license renewal application for Indian Point. "There are cracks that come through the liner that butts up against the concrete wall and flows down the outside of the wall."

Dacimo said his company's attempts to seal the major leaks with ceramic coating was proving ineffective.

“The process we’ve tried hasn’t been successful and it hasn’t solved the problem,” he said.

Dacimo contends that corrosions is not the problem.

“Even if corrosion were a problem, the amount is so slow that it would not affect plant operation for the next 20 years,” he said. “We are going to live with this; it doesn’t present a long term challenge.”

Phillip Musegaas of the environmental group Riverkeeper, the only group commenting to the ACRS of those groups opposing the license renewal, asked the board to consider the safety implications of legacy leaks that have filled two large lakes of contaminated radioactive groundwater under the reactors.

“There is a tritium plume from the Unit 2 spent fuel pool that is leaching into the Hudson River and another large plume contaminated with Strontium-90 and Cesium 137 from the Unit 1 spent fuel pool,” he said.

The Unit 1 pool was completely drained last year but Musegass said there was residual contamination in the groundwater and the water table. Two years ago Entergy’s geological studies showed that one contaminated lake was roughly 50 to 60 feet deep and the other was 30 feet wide by 350 feet long.

The panel will make recommendations to the NRC about their safety report and Indian Point’s license renewal application.

“These recommendations are taken very seriously,” said NRC spokesperson Neil Sheehan. “It’s a key piece of information to help with the final [re-licensing] decision.”

The ACRS recommendations are expected in September. The final NRC safety report is due in late July of this year.