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Page 5

Indian Point pipe leak poses no threat

By Abby Luby

BUCHANAN – A pipe eight feet below Unit 2 at the Indian Point nuclear power plant was discovered leaking radioactive water last week, but the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which oversees operations at the plant, said the tritium levels were low and didn't pose any threat to local drinking water.

The leak pushed out about 18 gallons of water a minute and contained trace amounts of tritium, a radioactive isotope that can cause certain types of cancer.

"The leakage was sampled and they found that it was about 2,000 picocuries per liter," said NRC spokesperson Neil Sheehan. "That's a small percentage of what's allowed by the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) in drinking water."

Sheehan said the coating meant to protect the 8-inch wide pipe from corrosion had deteriorated at the point of the leak, but further analysis is being done as to the cause. The pipe is connected to the condensate storage tank which holds about 600,000 gallons of backup water used to cool the reactor in case of an accident.

Water was puddling on the floor last Monday morning in the auxiliary feed-water pump building, said Jerry Nappi of Entergy.

"The water was not seen in earlier operator rounds so the leak, if there was one, was probably not very big," he said. "Plus, there was not a significant drop in water level in the condensate storage tank."

After discovering the leak Monday morning Entergy's crew started digging down under the floor and found a one-inch hole in the pipe. According to Nappi, the pipe was fixed in five days and by Saturday morning a new piece was welded into place.

When the leak was discovered, Entergy reported it only to their stakeholders, said Sheehan. "It did not reach the reportability threshold," he said.

Deborah Brancato, staff attorney for the environmental group Riverkeeper, said they were alarmed the information about the leak wasn't made public until a news article came out.

"If 18 gallons of tritiated water is leaking every minute, the public should be kept aware of those types of instances," she said.

In 2005, a leak from Unit Two's 40-foot deep spent fuel pool was highly contaminated with tritium with levels soaring to 600,000 picocuries per liter of water, 30 times higher than the drinking water standard.

Westchester Emergency Services Commissioner Tony Sutton said he got a call from Entergy the afternoon following the discovery of the leak.

"I would expect immediate notification if it was a health and safety issue," he said.

Sutton said the leak raises concerns about the age of the plant, which was built in the early 1970s.

"Here's a pipe that's 6 to 8 feet below a concrete pad that ruptured," Sutton said. "How many other pipes are in danger of rupturing and are they benign or would the consequence be devastating? Had this puddle not been detected by someone walking by, would it have gone unnoticed?"

The attorney general's office has raised the issue of monitoring underground pipes and cables in its contentions against the relicensing of Indian Point. Sheehan said that the NRC turned down the contention because the event was part of the everyday running of the plant.

"This was a clear demonstration of operability as opposed to waiting for a license renewal review, Sheehan said. "Entergy responded appropriately in this specific event. Relicensing looks at the aging program management that's in place to prevent these types of failures." Manna-Jo Greene, environmental director of Clearwater, who wants to see the plant closed, said, "The NRC's statement that this new leak is part of everyday maintenance and will not be considered under relicensing is an example of how narrow the relicensing process has become. It shows the inability of the NRC to look comprehensively at the big picture and the cumulative impacts and implications of many smaller problems."

Entergy last tested the pipe in May 2006, according to Nappi who said

concerns are different for a similar pipe for the Unit 3 reactor because the pipe system runs above ground.

According to Sheehan, Entergy reported that it would consider monitoring Indian Point 3 piping but that a review plan isn't expected until the company completes an analysis of the section of the leaking pipe.

Most of the water leaked into a manhole and eventually into the Hudson River via the discharge canal. Brancato said Riverkeeper wanted a detailed analysis from the NRC about how they sampled the radiated water.

"We are also concerned about the additional contamination to the river on top of the existing contamination and the long term, accumulative impacts," she said.

Paul Cataldo, the NRC resident inspector on site at Indian Point said the water has a long way to go to make it to the river.