

Indian Point's contamination woes: Entergy wants 20-year extension to run nuclear plant

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Chernin/AP

The Indian Point nuclear power station in Buchanan, N.Y., 35 miles north of midtown New York City.

The Indian Point nuclear power plant is sitting on enough contaminated soil, by federal estimates, to fill Yankee Stadium with radioactive sludge a foot deep.

Years of radioactive leaks have saturated some 1.63 million cubic feet of soil at the Westchester County plant, according to a letter from a Nuclear Regulatory Commission official to plant owner Entergy.

The leaks are from the reactor's 40-foot deep spent fuel pools that store used radioactive fuel, said John Boska, Indian Point's project manager with the NRC.

"Some of the contaminated soil may also have PCBs [polychlorinated biphenyls] that leaked from large electrical transformers, which are cooled by oil which often contained PCBs," said Boska.

Entergy has applied for a new operating license to keep the plant running an additional 20 years after their license expires in 2015. After 2035, when the new license expires and the plant is due to close, Entergy has 60 years to get rid of the contaminated soil and radioactive waste and clean up the entire site.

Officials said there is no immediate danger or public health threat, since the soil is below ground.

The NRC says Entergy won't have enough funds to remove the toxic soil when it finally closes the plant and clean up the site.

Entergy will need \$400 million for each of the three units to be closed down. The NRC claims Entergy is short \$100 million from the market meltdown.

In light of the shortfall, Entergy has committed an extra \$110 million in 2026 to its decommissioning fund, a mandated fund required by the NRC of all 103 nuclear power plants in the country.

The utility company pulls in more than \$2 million a day and more than \$700 million a year in profits from plants countrywide.

"We believe there are appropriate levels set aside in the decommissioning trust fund and that we are in compliance with NRC rules," said spokesman Jerry Nappi of Entergy.

Removing contaminated soil at Indian Point involves digging out utility tunnels and underground systems and demolishing many plant buildings where electricity is generated and where radioactive fuel is stored.

Boska said the contaminated soil and other radioactive waste is usually shipped by truck or rail to a waste disposal site in Utah or Texas.

"The waste is put in a container which can be made of flexible plastic, which prevents the soil from falling on the roadway or scattering in the wind," Boska said.

In June, Entergy asked the NRC if it could use their decommissioning funds to pay for storing spent fuel at the plant in special dry casks.

Boska didn't specify when the NRC would respond to Entergy, adding: "We have not yet reached a conclusion if the funds are adequate."