

# NORTH COUNTY NEWS

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## **Panel's report deems Indian Point safe**

*By Abby Luby*



Photo by Abby Luby

Four members of the independent safety panel, from the left: Cristine McCombs, James Rhodes, Neil Todrea, and Martin Vonk.

*Study says plant meets highest standards, but there is still room for improvement*

An independent safety evaluation report for the Indian Point nuclear power plants released last week says the plants are safe but there is much room for improvement.

The 12-person panel of professionals from the nuclear industry was asked to research and address high-profile safety issues garnered from public feedback. The panel's co-chair, James Rhodes, said over 6,000 man hours were spent on the report over the last four months. The 200-page report that cost plant owner Entergy \$4 million, had several criticisms and offered several recommendations.

"Indian Point is a safe plant," Rhodes said. "It meets the highest standards in the U.S. nuclear industry in most areas." Rhodes said the evaluation was based on comparing performance at Indian Point with what other high-performing U.S. plants.

The results of the report were announced at a sparsely attended

meeting held last Thursday, which included representatives of organizations seeking to shutter the plant, Entergy personnel and local labor unions. Representative from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which requested the study from Entergy in March, were not present.

Recommendations ranged from replacing outdated security technology with state-of-the-art equipment, hiring more staff to liaison with local officials to dealing with overgrown vegetation on the plant's outer barbed-wire fence facing the road.

Entergy spokesperson Jim Steets said he found the report very valuable.

"This is the road map for us to reach top level performance in all aspects of safety, security and emergency preparedness," he said. "We accept the criticisms and we will embrace them." Steets said the report mostly validates that Entergy is doing a good job.

"We have put over \$600 million on the plant since we purchased it in 2000," he said. "\$20 million was spent on a new, on-site office building."

The panel stressed the need for Entergy to improve its relationship with local officials for the purposes of emergency preparation.

"Entergy's unhealthy relationships with county and local officials clearly do not meet standards," Rhodes said.

Working on building and maintaining a respectable and trusting relationship with the public and public officials was tantamount, said the panel.

"You need to be proactive with frequent interactions with the surrounding communities, Rhodes told Entergy. "It's necessary to replace what is seen as a faceless and distant owner with the personal and familiar local contact."

The panel strongly suggested that Entergy hire more staff to work with local officials on emergency preparedness.

According to Steets, Entergy is in the process of interviewing for two new staff positions that will be dedicated to working with public officials on emergency preparedness.

"Two is not enough," said Westchester County Emergency Services Commissioner Anthony Sutton about Entergy's move to hire emergency planning staff. Sutton added that Entergy now uses emergency management staff in a dual capacity by reassigning them to work regularly on refueling outages. Sutton, however, was cautiously optimistic about how the report dealt with emergency preparedness.

"In the time allotted and the resources that were applied, I think they did a good job," he said. "It's an encouraging thing; it's one small step, but quite honestly we've been here before."

In addressing the longstanding concern about the plant's ability to sustain a terrorist attack, the panel neglected to cite a major study commissioned by the NRC in 1982 known as the Argonne Report. The panel focused only on the strength of the containment domes housing the nuclear reactors and does not reference any studies.

The panel said that a plane crashing into the containment dome wouldn't penetrate the walls. The Argonne report, however, said that the problem is not whether an aircraft smashes its way through the containment walls but whether the aircraft's impact and resulting fire damages essential equipment outside the containment.

Argonne specifically stated, "The results of an aircraft crash on a nuclear power plant are not limited to the effects of the impact of heavy parts (such as a jet engine) on civil engineering structures."

According to David Lochbaum of the Union of Concerned Scientists, the containment penetration issue is not the Achilles' heel of a plant's vulnerability to terrorist attacks.

"A plane simply does not have to crash through a reinforced concrete wall to cause serious damage," said Lochbaum. "That much force hitting the building causes it to shake."

Lochbaum explained that if the walls move enough, plumbing can snap and rupture one or more pipes essential for releasing reactor cooling water from outside pumps to prevent a meltdown.

"All terrorists need to do is to provide a path for cooling water to get out," explained Lochbaum, who added that a meltdown or catastrophic radiation release don't only depend on the breach of a hardened structure from the impact of a jet. "The ISE authors failed to address this reality," he added. "Whether intentional or not, the result is an inaccurate report."

The panel also reported that the aging plant's leaking spent fuel pools were not going into the ground water and was not a threat to the public.

"There is a collection system in place at Unit 2 that is plugging the small leaks," said co-chair Neil Todreas. "A small residue adds up to just teaspoons a day. We're not certain if it is condensation, but whatever it is, it's being collected and taken out."

Last year Entergy reported that two large plumes of radiated water had amassed under Units 2 and 3. The plumes measured 50- to 60-feet deep from 30- to 350-feet wide. Entergy decided not to attempt to drain the plumes.

Margo Schepart, of the Westchester Citizens Awareness Network, asked the panel about the timing of the report. She was displeased that the panel only provided one week's notice of the meeting.

"If you had enough time to prepare such nice booklets, why didn't you have time to give us [more] notice for this meeting?" she asked. "Many people are away on summer vacation and some would've been here if they had known about this meeting sooner."

Schepart also asked about the two-year construction project now taking place on Route 9.

"The road is the major evacuation route in the plant's emergency management zone," she said. "Why didn't you take that into consideration when writing about emergency planning?"

ISE Panel member Cristine McCombs said the scope of the report was limited to Entergy and its role in any evacuation.

"The only aspect we considered was the estimated time for evacuation when we interviewed public officials," she said.

Jerry Connolly, a retired business manager and board member of Boilermakers Local 5 New York of the Labor Coalition said he blamed Westchester County for refusing to take part in the emergency drills. The county has been boycotting the tabletop drills for the past few years, claiming evacuating a 10-mile radius around the plant is unsafe.

Steets said that Entergy is expected to respond to the report within 60 days.

The 12 panelists are all specialists in the nuclear industry field. The two co-chairs chosen by Entergy in March, 2008 are Drs. James Rhodes, a former president and chief executive officer of Virginia Electric and Power Company, and Neil Todreas, Professor Emeritus of Nuclear Engineering, nuclear science and mechanical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for 38 years.

Rhodes and Todreas chose the remaining 10 panelists. When the panel members were chosen, there were complaints from activists that the panelists were being paid by Entergy and therefore could not be partial or completely independent. Also, many criticized the panel for being pro-nuclear because of their long years in the industry. The panelists are: Kenneth E. Brockman, John S. Dyson, Elmer J. (Buzz) Galbraith, Maureen O. Helmer, William F. Kane, Cristine McCombs, Dr. Harvey M. Stevens, and Martin Vonk.