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Entergy panel to begin safety assessment

By Abby Luby

Critics say the group lacks independence

A panel of 12 nuclear experts hired by Entergy Nuclear, owner of the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plants in Buchanan, has started to work on the safety assessment for two reactors. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), the federal oversight agency, ordered a safety review in early March because of several operating problems and Entergy's repeated failures to complete their new emergency siren system. Entergy has applied for new operating licenses for Units One and Two, which expire in 2013 and 2015.

Announced as an "independent safety evaluation panel," Entergy said it wanted to ensure the panel's independence by being as removed from the study as much as possible. Entergy spokesman Jim Steets said that Entergy's only participation would be footing the bill.

"This is a genuinely independent panel," said Steets. "Entergy is anxious for the panel to get on with its business so they can objectively assess the safety of the plants. We are an open book and we'll support the panel's efforts across the board."

Steets added that "there are no budget constraints on what the panel does. We'll pay whatever bills they submit relevant to their assessment and evaluation."

Entergy hired the Washington-based PR firm Potomac Communications specifically to handle the safety assessment study. According Potomac spokesperson Matthew Simmons, the firm also represents the Nuclear Energy Institute (NEI), a well-known lobbying group for the nuclear industry.

"We have had an ongoing relationship with NEI," Simmons said. Simmons issued Potomac's announcement of the Indian Point panel that said Entergy chose only the two co-chairs for the

group, Drs. James Rhodes and Neil Todreas, who would then choose the remaining panel members. Just last week, Rhodes said they had chosen the rest of the panel and had their first meeting.

Because the panel is being paid by Entergy, critics have said the study will be anything but independent.

Dr. Edwin Lyman, a senior scientist with the Union of Concerned Scientists who authored “Chernobyl-on-the-Hudson?” – a book about radiological consequences of a terrorist attack at Indian Point – said a true independent panel would not be compensated by plant owners.

“It’s really a conflict of interest and there has to be full disclosure of any financial ties,” he said.

Lyman was also skeptical about how Entergy would handle any dissenting voices from the panel about plant safety.

“There’s intense pressure to produce a unified [report] and it’s useless for Entergy’s purposes if panelists want to fully express their views,” said Lyman. “The [safety assessment] is not just related to Entergy but to the whole nuclear industry, which will be watching the outcome of this panel.”

County Executive Andrew Spano criticized Entergy for not including any local officials on the panel. In a prepared statement Spano said, “As far as this evaluation goes, I only hope they spend some time talking to us.”

Spano sued the NRC last year for using outdated criteria for Entergy’s re-licensing application, criteria that didn’t include providing for adequate emergency evacuation in the densely populated area surrounding the plant. In his statement about Entergy’s new safety panel Spano blamed the NRC for not assessing the plant themselves.

“It was unfortunate that the NRC has refused to do an independent safety assessment, leaving Entergy to evaluate itself as the only alternative,” Spano wrote. “Of course, none of this would be necessary if the NRC’s re-licensing criteria were as stringent as it is for original licensing.”

The NRC has repeatedly said its ongoing oversight program with on-site inspectors already reviews safety at nuclear power plants.

Congresswoman Nita Lowey (D-NY) also commented on the Entergy safety review panel.

“The Independent Safety Review should be conducted by a credible and objective panel of experts not only to evaluate Entergy’s capabilities, but also to address previously documented concerns about the ability to protect the public in

the event of an emergency,” she said in an e-mail.

Lowey was part of a Congressional team that introduced legislation two years ago requiring an independent safety assessment as part of Entergy’s re-licensing process. Co-sponsoring the bill with Lowey was Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D-Middletown), Reps. Eliot Engel (D-Bronx), then Representative Sue Kelly (R-Katonah) and later John Hall (D-Dover), and Christopher Shays (R-Conn). The Senate has a similar bill sponsored by U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) but to date the bill has been snagged in committee.

Panel Co-Chair Rhodes said they plan to study the language of that legislation.

“We haven’t studied it in great detail,” he said. “But we will consider it in our evaluation.”

Congressman Hall issued a statement this week that also opposed the safety study.

“Any committee appointed and paid for by Entergy cannot be trusted to independently and objectively evaluate Indian Point,” Hall’s statement said. “A truly independent assessment would have an unquestionable mandate to put public safety first and ensure that the deficiencies at Indian Point are identified and addressed before re-licensing could be considered.”

Lisa Rainwater of the environmental group Riverkeeper said that their preference for a panel would be similar to the safety assessment team at the Maine Yankee nuclear plant 12 years ago; the plant was closed when the assessment uncovered too many problems.

“It was a team of 26 members including inspectors from the NRC who had no affiliation with Maine Yankee, contractors, a state appointed radiological expert, nuclear engineer and a safety expert.” said Rainwater. The team also included an advisory group with five citizens. Riverkeeper has filed contentions opposing the re-licensing of Indian Point.

Rhodes said the panel will hold a public meeting at the end of April to get feedback about safety issues and concerns.

“We want to get feedback so we’re going to be listening to comments by the general public,” he said. “We hope to hold the meeting in the vicinity of the Indian Point site.”

Rhodes said that comments can be called in to the panel at (202) 463-8801 or e-mailed to safety@nyindianpoint.org.

Who’s on the safety committee?

By Abby Luby

Here’s look at the members of Entergy’s safety review

committee:

Dr. James T. Rhodes: Panel co-chair, a former president and chief executive officer of Virginia Electric and Power Company.

Dr. Neil E. Todreas: Panel co-chair, professor emeritus of nuclear engineering, nuclear science and mechanical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for 38 years.

Kenneth E. Brockman: President and principal consultant with his firm MEM, LLC. Over 30 years of experience the International Atomic Energy Agency, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Detroit Edison Company and Westinghouse Electric Company.

John S. Dyson: Chairman of Millbank Capital Management, cabinet member with New York Governor Hugh Carey, former chairman of the New York Power Authority for six years, former deputy mayor of New York City.

Elmer J. (Buzz) Galbraith: Senior assistance representative with the Institute of Nuclear Power Operations; worked with Public Service Electric & Gas Company and Washington Public Power Supply System. Twenty years in the U.S. Navy as commanding officer of a nuclear submarine.

Maureen O. Helmer: Practicing attorney for energy, telecommunications and ethics, former chair of the New York State Public Service Commission, former chair of the New York State Board on Electric Generation Siting and the Environment.

William F. Kane: President of consulting firm WFK Associates, LLC; served six years as deputy executive director for operations. He also served as an officer in the U.S. Army.

Cristine McCombs: Former director of the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency responsible for emergency planning for communities surrounding three nuclear facilities, director of state government programs for Beck Disaster Recovery for hazard mitigation, emergency preparedness/planning, response and recovery.

Dr. Harvey M. Stevens: President of Stevens Associates, a technology firm specializing in technical and security engineering support to government and industry. His expertise is in the fields of emergency planning, risk analysis, counter-terrorism, and threat assessment.

Martin Vonk: An emergency preparedness consultant with the Nuclear Management Company, Commonwealth Edison, Exelon Nuclear and the University of Missouri.

T. Gary Broughton: Former chief executive officer for General Public Utilities Nuclear who worked on technical changes to re-start Three Mile Island Nuclear Power Plant.

Clayton “Scotty” Hinnant: Former chief nuclear officer for Progress Energy, overseeing performance improvement for five nuclear power plants.