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Transformer fire calls safety of plant into question

More woes at Indian Point

By Abby Luby



Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant

The latest incident last Friday at the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plants put the exclamation point on successive system failures at the Buchanan based reactors. The loud blast was followed by a fire on one of two transformers dedicated to Unit 3, causing an automatic shut down of that unit. The previous week low water levels in the plant's steam generators also forced a shutdown at Unit 3.

These unexpected mishaps preceded numerous failures when testing the new siren system, a source of frustration not only for plant owner Entergy Nuclear Northeast but for county and state officials.

"My son was playing baseball about a mile away and saw the plume of smoke go up," said John Ritornato, owner of Johnny Rits – a bar just outside the power plant gates at Broadway and Bleakley Avenue. "Although I'm right outside the plant, I didn't hear a thing."

As one transformer went up in flames last Friday, the adjacent transformer was also being damaged, said Neil Sheehan, spokesman for the Nuclear Regulatory

Commission.

Sheehan said the fire was apparently caused by the bushings, ceramic insulators on top of transformers that look like disks piled on top of each other. As of Monday, the NRC still had no official confirmation from Entergy about the cause of the fire.

“The fire was handled by our own fire brigade,” said Entergy spokesman Jim Steets. “It was extinguished and Unit 3 shut down automatically.”

NRC senior inspector Don Jackson, who was on site at the plant, said a spare transformer was being checked for safety.

“There has been no degradation to the interior power and we have three backup diesels available to start up Indian Point 3,” he said.

New York State’s Joint Information Center, an arm of the State Emergency Management Office (SEMO), issued a statement claiming that there was no release of radiation into the environment from the transformer fire. A “Level 4” emergency, the least serious situation, was declared by Entergy, requiring them to immediately notify government officials and emergency responders.

The last known accident in the transformer yard at the plant was in July, 2002 when a Brooklyn contractor was landscaping and accidentally electrocuted himself.

Side Bar on Usage

Transformers generate power from the plant to the power grid. According to Jackson, before the explosion and the transformer fire, Unit 3 had been shut down for 24 days for routine refueling. During and after the fire, Unit 2 remained online, running to its full capacity providing about 1000 mega watts. When both units are running, the plant produces 2000 mega watts of electricity.

According to records from Con Edison, the utility company providing electricity to residents in New York City and Westchester County, the region uses 9000 to 13,000 megawatts of electricity daily, depending on the weather. The 2000 megawatts produced by Indian Point is about 15% to 22% of the daily region demands. Entergy has claimed that Indian Point provides up to 40% of the region’s electricity needs, which it does when the demand falls to 5000 megawatts. Usage usually drops on Sunday mornings in the spring and fall between 3a.m. and 5 a.m. when the city is asleep, offices are shut down, air conditioners are off. Those off-peak times of less usage happens about 12 times a year.

Unexpected transformer failure

Despite the incident, Steets said the failed transformer was recently inspected

during a very rigorous monthly diagnostic program. The inspection didn't reveal anything wrong.

"There was no reason from the program that the transformer would fail," said Steets. "But they will fail from time to time. We were prepared for this otherwise, it would take several months to return to service."

Entergy will replace the transformer, a process that will take about two or three weeks to complete, he said. During that time it's possible that Unit 3 could return to about half of capacity.

Lower Safety Rating

Sheehan explained that the NRC lowers the safety rating of a plant if there are more than three unplanned shutdowns within a year. The shutdown of Unit 3 last week lowered Indian Point's rating from green—the highest rating—to white, the next to highest rating.

"We will be sending a supplemental inspection team to inspect Entergy's repairs when they are done," he said. "If they've repaired it to our satisfaction, they will get a higher safety rating level."

The incidents come on the heels of problems with Entergy's new siren system. Out of 150 new emergency electronic sirens, 123 failed during testing. In the fall, Entergy announced that it's goal to complete the new alert system was January, 2007. Now they are hoping for sometime this month.

Repeated testing was heard in communities surrounding the plants for the last few weeks. The system was updated with electronic sirens bearing eight independent horns at each location, having greater amplification to reach areas that have not previously had siren coverage. Those areas are primarily the Palisades Parkway, some area parks and Bear Mountain State Park. Entergy said the louder sirens would be backed up by high speed telephone notification, radio and internet.

ISA, license renewal

With the spate of problems, Congressman John Hall (D/Dover Plains) issued a statement shortly after the explosion, calling on his Congressional colleagues to pass his proposed legislation requiring an Independent Safety Assessment of the Indian Point plants.

"This explosion and fire at Indian Point, triggering a shutdown of Unit 3, is only the latest in a string of accidents and unplanned shutdowns at the plant," Hall said in the statement. "It only reinforces the necessity of an objective, truly independent safety study before re-licensing for another 20 years is considered."

In February, Hall introduced a bill that called for an independent panel of nuclear industry experts and NRC officials to conduct the ISA. Hall said this week the bill is currently before the Energy and Commerce Committee and he hopes it moves out of committee within the next two months.

Hall has received co-sponsorship from House members Nita Lowey, Maurice Hinchey, Eliot Engel and Christopher Shays, plus Senators Hillary Clinton and Charles Schumer.

“The level of support, I think, has been very good,” Hall told North County News of the ISA legislation. “Everyone who I’ve talked to says it sounds like it makes good common sense.”

The House of Representatives’ busy agenda, which has included the budget, appropriations regarding the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, minimum wage legislation and other measures has delayed the bill to the full legislative body, he said.

Entergy plans to officially apply for a 20-year extension for its operating license for both Units 2 and 3 sometime this month. Sheehan said the lower safety rating will be looked at during the license renewal process, but the NRC will mainly focus on how Entergy managed the aging plant.

“We will look at the key systems, structures and components and any environmental impacts during an additional 20 years of operation,” he explained. “If we find there is a nexus between aging management and unplanned shutdowns, it’s certainly something we want to take a look at, but in general we consider this to be more of a day-to-day operational issue.”

Adding his voice of support for the ISA was County Legislator Michael Kaplowitz (D-Somers).

In a press release issued last Friday Kaplowitz said, “I am calling on Entergy to voluntarily join those of us who are asking for an Independent Safety Assessment, and make a formal request to the NRC urging them to agree to the ISA.”