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What if ... ? Story and photo by Abby Luby

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The scenario runs like this: A serious amount of radioactive material has been released into the environment from Plant Two at the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plants in Buchanan.

Evacuation is urged by four county executives from the counties within the 10-mile emergency management zone. Students are getting on buses headed for emergency reception centers while parents are told to wait for one hour before picking up their children.

But it's just a tabletop drill - an exercise mandated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to make sure that plant owner Entergy alerts the surrounding communities early enough to evacuate the area in case of an accident.

The drill is re-enacted every two years. The scenarios vary, but the question is the same: Is there an effective communication system for emergencies?

Getting the word out

The drill took place on Tuesday and involved government officials from Westchester, Rockland, Putnam and Orange counties, members of the NRC and FEMA, the Department of Homeland Security (DHHS), local and state police, and Entergy employees.

For the purposes of the drill, a mock news center was set up at the State Police Traffic Management center in Hawthorne, frequently referred to as the bunker.

The lobby was replete with a live teleconferencing network and actual spokespersons from Entergy, the county and state.

Mock newspeople asked questions every hour as officials "announced" the progress of the evacuation and efforts to stop the radioactive release at the plant.

Reaching out to actual law enforcement was real, however. Just before 1 p.m. at the Yorktown Police station, Sergeant Kurt Gullery said his department had just become active in the drill.

"We have people here from the county and from the NRC," said Sergeant Gullery. "We expect to send two officers out to observe the traffic shortly."

"We want to find the gaps in communication, if there are any," said Entergy spokesperson Larry Gottlieb. "The state police are working with local police to set up traffic controls in certain areas."

Audio failure very real

But the most obvious, real communications problem at the Hawthorne news center was audio failure. Podium microphones ceased to work, wireless mics were ineffective, crackling audio from folks being televised from other counties left holes in their reports, which went unexplained and unreported.

People pretending to be the press, who complained about the audio failure, spoke into a wireless mic that had little amplification.

What NRC looks for

Neil Sheehan, spokesperson for the NRC, said the drill is evaluated from beginning to end. "These exercises are designed to put the players through their paces and for the evaluators to observe how they respond all along the way," said Sheehan.

"We want to see if plant personnel are responding correctly to the technical issues challenging them, making the right calls as far as emergency notifications and doing all of that in a timely manner."

Grading of the on-site response is done by the NRC, while DHS/FEMA assesses the off-site response, according to Sheehan.

Business as usual

For some critics, the scenario offered no new challenges.

Phil Musegaas, policy analyst for the environmental group Riverkeeper, said past drills have been similar. "We've heard this type of scenario before," said Musegaas. "It's the same type of exercise they usually do. They are well versed in this to the point of boredom."

As the day progressed, the scenario was extended with traffic accidents, siren failures and school evacuation updates.

Reports that the radiation was headed north prompted the emergency alert system to advise all 311,000 people within 10 miles of the plant to take one KI pill (Potassium Iodide).

"KI is not a cure-all," said Christine Smith of the New York State's Disaster Response team. In her report at the news center, she advised everyone to take it, but warned that KI only prevents thyroid cancer. Every hour, updated press releases were distributed to the "media" followed by an announcement.

Just a drill

The mantra for all spokespersons after giving their reports was the verbal tag, "this is a drill." And critics such as the Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition (IPSEC) agreed that it was not only just a drill, but as a drill, it was unrealistic. The emergency evacuation plan was working, said spokespersons involved with the drill.

But in 2002, the evacuation plan was reported highly inadequate by James Witt, former FEMA director, who was hired by Governor George Pataki to evaluate the plan.

Michel Lee, spokesperson for IPSEC, said outside the Hawthorne center on Tuesday, that it was inexcusable to exclude first responders from the scenario.

"The drill is unequivocally dysfunctional," said Lee. "We know that the emergency evacuation plan has been fixed to the policy of keeping Indian Point open at all costs. But the cost involves our families."

"As long as Indian Point is in operation, we want the least bad plan. If we look at 911 and Katrina, they are road maps to the problems we are likely to encounter in the face of disaster."

'A make-believe scenario'

"You could lodge that criticism against any type of exercise," said Entergy's Gottlieb. "We are trying to be as realistic as possible in the types of scenarios we are dealing with. There's always going to be criticism from folks who think the emergency plan will never work."

Rockland resident Susan Shapiro said she spoke to Rockland emergency officials, who told her there was an accident on the Tappan Zee Bridge while the drill was taking place. The

fact that a real incident was not allowed to be part of the drill made the exercise useless, said Shapiro.

"This whole drill is a farce," said Shapiro. "It's a make-believe scenario, a hypothetical scenario - a drill in an unrealistic vacuum."

Shapiro cited that fact that the scenario called for a radiation release that would drift north.

"The release in the drill was headed north against the prevailing winds, which everyone knows are south."

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