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Contaminated water found near Indian Point

By Abby Luby

Trace amounts of Strontium-90, a cancer-causing radioactive isotope, have been found in a well on property next door to the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plants.

Entergy Nuclear, the plant's owner, has been testing the groundwater for the past three years since finding water laced with radioactive nuclides leaking from the plant's spent fuel pools. Strontium-90 is a carcinogen that lodges in the bones if ingested.

The Strontium-90 was found in a 50-foot well about 1,500 feet south of the power plant at the neighboring Lafarge factory. The well was originally dug in 2000 and is now part of Entergy's efforts to monitor groundwater leaks.

Jerry Nappi, spokesperson for Entergy, said the Strontium-90 did not come from Indian Point.

"We don't believe the Strontium is from the plant because the elevation of the well is higher than the spent fuel pools and the water which carries the Strontium doesn't go up-hill," he said.

Phil Museegas of the environmental group Riverkeeper, said they are waiting to see the results of tests being done by the New York State Department of Conservation and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the federal oversight agency for nuclear power plants.

"I don't think we could accept what Entergy is saying until we hear from the state and public agencies that are involved," Museegas said. "We just can't rely on Entergy and hope the problem will go away."

Neil Sheehan of the NRC said the amount of Strontium-90 in the well was just above the level of detection.

"It's only a fraction of the EPA's (Environmental Protection Agency) safe

drinking water level,” he said. Test results of water samples are expected in about one month.

Sheehan said they believe the Strontium-90 is from background, or atmospheric radiation, a residual from atomic weapons testing in the 1950s.

However, as far back as 1994 levels of background radiation were barely detectable according to a 1994 Annual Report produced by the New York State Department of Health (DOH). The 14-year old report, entitled, “Environmental Radiation in New York State,” said that “levels of fission products from previous atmospheric weapons testing continue to show a slow decrease with time” and that “all measurements show concentrations that are below the minimum detectable levels.”

“If this was background radiation I would think it would be showing up in a lot more wells,” said Museegas. “We need to know what the extent of the contamination is – that’s the question that has not been answered.”

The DOH has been monitoring and testing for background radiation throughout the state since 1982. Although data is still being collected annually, it is no longer being analyzed. The last published report from areas around three of the state’s nuclear power plants, including Indian Point was made in 1994.

Assemblyman Richard Brodsky (D-Greenburgh) said other government reports have stated that there is no safe level for Strontium emissions.

“The government standard for Strontium is zero,” he said. “We are now seeking to get the Department of Health to do an analysis of the sources and the health dangers.”

Leaks found from the spent fuel pools have been showing up in the groundwater at the plant since 2005. Entergy and the NRC have determined that the leaks are coming from the spent fuel pools which are used to store highly radioactive, used fuel. The pools are about 45-feet deep and below ground level.

Lori O’Connell of the DEC said in an e-mail that the agency is continuing to participate in the ongoing NRC inspection of the groundwater monitoring at Indian Point.

“We will be on-site next week with the NRC as part of that ongoing effort,” she wrote. “This issue will be covered as part of that site visit.”

Entergy’s tests results from samples taken from the LaFarage well are due back in four weeks, according to Nappi.

“We test the groundwater every three months,” he said. “There are no plans to dig more test wells in the area because our remediation plan has been in place and we feel the system we have is more than adequate.”