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Indian Point empties leaky fuel pool

By Abby Luby



Photo courtesy of Entergy

The fifth and final canister of spent fuel from Unit 1 was filled with radioactive spent fuel last week. All five canisters will be stored at the plant.

Workers at the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant completed a two year project last week, as they finished draining radioactive spent fuel from the plant's Unit 1 pool.

In 2005, plant owner Entergy discovered that strontium-90, a cancer-causing radioactive isotope, was leaking from Unit 1 and going into the Hudson River. According to Entergy and a 2008 ground water report by the federal oversight agency, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), the spent fuel had been leaking since 1990.

Unit 1, the oldest reactor of the three on site, was built in 1962 and closed down in 1974 because of problems in the emergency core cooling system. Groundwater tests in 2005 showed that strontium-90 levels in the groundwater were three times the level allowed in drinking water.

Work to drain the pool was begun two years ago, said Entergy spokesperson Jerry Nappi.

"This is significant for us because now all the fuel has been removed," he said. "There is no more strontium-90 in the pool."

The spent fuel was poured into five canisters which will be stored at the plant. Nappi said that the pool would be completely drained and cleaned by April 2009.

“This will completely eliminate the chance for any leakage whatsoever from Unit 1 and close the chapter on this Indian Point legacy issue,” he added.

After all contaminants are filtered out of the pool, the pool is cleaned with high pressure water hoses. NRC spokesperson Neil Sheehan said they were monitoring Entergy’s progress on draining the pool.

“The contamination has been there for decades and is the primary source of the most serious contamination at that site,” he said.

Sheehan said that the [spent fuel] water is filtered before emptied into storage tanks.

“The [chemical] make-up of the water will determine how long it takes for the radioactivity to decay,” he explained. “When it is at a low level it will be slowly released into the Hudson River.”

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, it takes 29.1 years for strontium-90 to lose half its radioactivity.

Phillip Museegas of the environmental group Riverkeeper said he was glad to know the pool was drained. Riverkeeper has opposed the operation of Indian Point mainly because of the plant’s impact on the Hudson River.

“I think it’s a good development because the source of the leak will be resolved,” he said.

“The draining and cleaning of the Unit-1 pool still doesn’t address the contamination that has been leaked out and leached into the Hudson River,” Museegas added. “Our main concern is about the environmental impacts of strontium-90 and if those can be remediated. Although the law allows for the release of radionuclides into the river, we disagree with that. And does [Entergy] really know what’s in this sludge?”

There are 57 wells monitoring ground water for radioactive leaks at Indian Point. Nappi said the monitoring program is still in progress, including the wells around Unit 1.

Siren system update

Entergy ran the second in a series of three tests on their new, emergency notification siren system last month.

“We are pleased to say that we had a 99.4 percent success rate,” said Entergy spokesperson Robyn Bentley of the Sept. 24 tests. “The NRC requires a 97 percent success rate.”

Only one of the 172 sirens failed to sound, located in Stony Point, Rockland County. Entergy sent a crew to check out the

faulty siren.

The NRC was monitoring the tests, according to agency spokesperson Neil Sheehan.

“We issued a confirmatory order for the testing of the new system that specified the sirens need to work at a high percentage,” he said.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) required Entergy to test the new system for one year before dismantling the old system, a 156-siren system that is still operational. In August, FEMA agreed to have the new system placed in service.

Entergy was mandated by the Energy Policy Act passed in Congress in 2005 to install an emergency alert system with backup power in case of a power black out. The system cost Entergy \$30 million and is able to alert some 300,000 residents within 10 miles of the reactors. In the last two years, Entergy has missed two deadlines to replace its old siren system and paid \$780,000 in fines to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The new sirens can be heard within the 10-mile Emergency Planning Zone in Westchester, Rockland, Putnam and Orange Counties. A low-level siren sound will be heard in Harriman State Park and Bear Mountain State Park and is reported to have 60-square miles of additional coverage.

Emergency planning booklet

Last week, Westchester County mailed out the latest version of the Indian Point Emergency Planning Guide that helps people know what to do if there is an accident at Indian Point. The guide, “Emergency Planning for the Indian Point Nuclear Plants,” has an updated map listing evacuation routes, reception centers, bus routes and critical information about school relocation centers.

Yorktown residents will have to report to such reception centers as Fox Lane High School in Bedford and H.C. Crittenden Middle School in Armonk. Residents in Peekskill will go to White Plains High School. Cortlandt residents will head to Harrison High School in Armonk.

The guide also tells where to get free KI-potassium iodide if there is a radioactive release. The KI pills prevent thyroid cancer. It also explains that pets are not allowed at reception centers and advises pet owners to get their pets to kennels or relatives outside the 10 mile emergency planning zone.