

NORTH COUNTY NEWS

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Entergy moves toward license renewal

By Abby Luby



Photos by Abby Luby

NRC promotion panel from left, Ronnie Franovich, Sam Collins, Darell Roberts, Richard Conte.

The Indian Point Nuclear Power Plants are getting closer to having their operating license renewed by the federal oversight agency, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

At a public meeting last week in Cortlandt, the NRC met with Entergy Nuclear, the owner of the Buchanan-based plants, and reviewed the utility company's progress on problems found at the plant during an NRC site re-licensing inspection in the spring.

About 50 people showed up at the meeting that marked the midway point in the two-year license renewal process which began in April 2007 when Entergy applied to keep the plants running until 2033 and 2035. The application review and meeting is one part of the license renewal application.

The NRC told Entergy staff, headed by plant Vice President Fred Dacimo, that they were on track to fix aging plant components. The NRC's Glenn Meyer said that eight staff members had expended 1500 hours on inspecting the facilities.

"We looked at the material condition of the equipment and how Entergy's aging management program is lining up with your re-licensing application," Meyer told the Entergy contingent.

Meyer said one problem was how Entergy wrongly omitted from their re-licensing application the monitoring procedures for the coolant pump motors. Entergy officials said they left out the information because the pumps and motors are maintained off site. The reactor coolant pump pumps water from the steam generator (the component that turns the turbines to produce electricity) back into the reactor vessel. It's the water that's used to cool the reactors at Indian Point. Because these high speed pumps are large, 15 feet high, utility companies generally send the pumps and motors back to the original vendor to do repairs.

David Lochbaum of the Union of Concerned Scientists said that if the motor is not properly lubricated the pump shaft can stop rotating smoothly and any friction could cause the shaft to snap, releasing large amounts of water on the floor.

"If the pump is getting insufficient lubrication, the temperature can rise and the gaskets, which hold the water inside, will break," Lochbaum said, "and water that should be going back into the reactor will leak out faster than you are able to put it back in."

The NRC noted that Entergy agreed to add the additional information to the application.

The NRC, which has never denied a license renewal application to a commercial nuclear power plant, has a 400-page check list for utility companies applying for new licenses. The list is part of the "Generic Aging Lessons Learned" report (GALL) and reactor coolant pumps are included on the list.

Lochbaum said documenting the pump's condition is extremely important to an aging plant.

"The excuse by Entergy seems a little on the flimsy side," he said. "Merely doing the work off-site shouldn't be an excuse to omit the information from the license application. The good news is that the NRC called them on it."

Another problem cited in the NRC report was how Entergy monitored the diesel fuel program. Diesel backup generators are needed for emergency power if the plant loses power during a blackout. In its renewal application, Entergy neglected to properly document how it would test

for the wall thickness of diesel fuel storage tanks at Unit 3 reactor. Also omitted were the procedures for testing the diesel unit at Unit 2 reactor. The NRC noted at the meeting that Entergy ran tests on the generator a few days before the June 18 meeting, proving they had proper testing procedures in place.

Mark Jacobs of the Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition, a group arguing against the plant's license renewal, said he wasn't satisfied with what issues the NRC is studying as part of the license renewal process.

"We need a license renewal process that includes many more aspects of the functions of a nuclear power plant," Jacobs said. "There have been requests for rule changes but it shouldn't be incumbent on citizens like us to be the watchdog for the utility industry. It's up to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to do this. We need you to be on our side and time and again we find that you aren't." Ronnie Franovich of the NRC license renewal branch said that the relicensing process only focuses on the aging components of the plant.

"The current oversight process by the NRC is adequate to ensure public health and safety," she said. "For license renewal, aging is really the concern."

Franovich reminded the audience that license renewal is voluntary, not a requirement.

"Entergy has consistently managed and invested in Indian Point for the long-term making sizable capital expenditures to improve the quality and efficiency of this important facility," added Amber Sisson of the New York Area Affordable Reliable Electricity Alliance, a group that supports the continuing operation of Indian Point.

Richard Conte, Region One chief engineer for the NRC, said a follow-up inspection for the report would be done prior to the license renewal in 2013. The NRC will issue a safety evaluation report in September 2008, the same time the draft supplemental environmental impact statement will be issued. There is a tentative public meeting set for October 2008.

A number of groups, among them Westchester County and the New York Attorney General's office, have filed about 150 contentions. If any are approved, it will require a

hearing with the NRC license review board. Sam Collins, the NRC Region One administrator, said hearings with groups opposing the relicensing could extend the process for an indefinitely.