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Debate Continues over Indian Point relicensing

By Abby Luby

CORTLANDT MANOR - An impassioned and contentious public continued to debate the relicensing of the Indian Point nuclear power plants before the Nuclear Regulatory Commission during two public hearings held last Thursday.

Several hundred people crowded into a large ball room for both public hearings held in the afternoon and evening at Colonial Terrace in Cortlandt Manor. The hearings are required by the NRC, the nuclear regulatory agency, as part of the re-licensing process for nuclear power plants. In 2007, Entergy, the owners of Indian Point, applied to renew the operating licenses for Units 2 and 3. The current license expires in 2013 and 2015 and a new license would keep the twin plants running for an additional 20 years.

The hearings sought specific feedback on environmental impacts if the plant continued to operate. Preliminary findings in the NRC's own environmental study, the General Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS) released in December, said impacts from Indian Point were expected to be minimal and the agency recommended continued operation.

Environmentalists who want to see the plant closed argue that 1.2 billion fish die each year from the plant's daily intake of 2.5 billion gallons of Hudson River water needed to cool the plant's giant heated steam turbines. The plant's system is known as "once through cooling system," and it returns water to the river that is several degrees warmer, creating a thermal shock that kills the fish, environmentalists claim.

Fred Dacimo, Entergy's Site Vice President for license renewal, disagreed with the data on the fish kill.

"Little credit has been given Entergy for spending over \$100 million to retrofit the plant with state-of-the-art fish intake systems," he said. "I've worked at Indian Point for over ten years and we agree with the NRC staff with their overall preliminary findings. There is no reason, from an environmental perspective, not to proceed with the license renewal process."

Phil Museegas of the environmental group Riverkeeper countered by saying the impacts of Indian Point on Hudson River fish are significant. Riverkeeper opposes the license renewal of Indian Point.

"Indian Point's antiquated and once through cooling system kills billions of fish, eggs and larva every year through entrainment and impingement" said Museegas, who

referred to a report commissioned by Riverkeeper last year that found 10 out of 13 Hudson River signature fish species were in decline.

Museegas attacked the GEIS for being inconclusive and basing its findings on the agency's own studies as well as those submitted by Entergy.

"The NRC admits that they're not sure what the impacts are [on the fish] and they could range from small to large. It's like saying maybe it will rain, but maybe not."

But many who came to support the re-licensing didn't speak about the environment, rather they argued that keeping Indian Point open provides jobs and cheap electricity, an important consideration during the present recession.

Filling the first eight rows was a contingent from a Brooklyn-based organization called ShareNY which stands for "Safe, Healthy, Affordable and Reliable Energy." Several ShareNY members, also from Harlem and the Bronx, wore t-shirts that said "Put the Power Back in Your Hands." They held signs favoring the re-licensing. Entergy is a member of the New York City group, according to the ShareNY website.

"Indian Point provides the clean and affordable electricity that homes, businesses, schools, and hospitals in New York City rely on," said Maria Castro, the President and CEO of the Manhattan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, also a member of ShareNY. "A safe and secure facility like Indian Point is key to the City's environmental and economic health."

Local residents were also concerned about jobs. Ossining resident Lee Carter, 35, of Carpenters Union Local 11 based in Hawthorne, said his union sent a number of members to the NRC hearing so their voice would be heard.

"I work at the plant on a regular basis," he said. "The union has about 1500 members, about 64 work at Indian Point every on a yearly basis."

A burst of applause followed Thomas Ryan, a field construction boiler maker from Local Union 5 who said "We hear about endangered species - the middle class is the most endangered species today and is the most in need in the United States." Ryan said he has worked at Indian Point intermittently over the last nine years.

"I live in the 10 mile kill zone over in Yorktown with my wife and child and Indian Point is undoubtedly, hands down, the cleanest, safest, most secure and most efficient plant I've ever worked in."

Nuclear proponent Patrick Moore, co-chair of the Clean and Safe Energy Coalition, said that nuclear energy is reliable and affordable.

"No member of the public has ever been harmed by nuclear power in the United States," said Moore, who was the co-founder and former leader of Greenpeace. "It's safe to live and work in the nuclear plant, nuclear energy has strong environmental benefits and is a good alternative to fossil fuels."

But environmentalists pressed their claims. Susan Leifer of the Sierra Club said energy produced at Indian Point is not 'pollution free.' She referred to the large amounts

of radioactive radon gas resulting from mining uranium, the essential fuel in nuclear reactors.

“When you mine uranium you burn a tremendous amount of coal [in the process],” she said.

Leifer also contended there was also no solution for storing the spent fuel.

Nancy Burton, Co-Director of the Mothers Milk Project based in Redding Ridge Connecticut, told the NRC that the carcinogen Strontium-90 was detected in 60 samples of milk from breastfeeding mothers and lactating goats, cows and sheep within a 50 mile radius of Indian Point.

“We learned that all but two of 11 mothers who shared their breastmilk with us had concentrations of strontium-90 in their milk.” Strontium-90, known to cause bone cancer, leukemia and diseases of the immune system, has been leaking from Indian Point’s spent fuel pools for at least 15 years.

Cortlandt Supervisor Linda D. Puglisi and Peekskill Mayor Mary Foster both told the NRC about their concerns of radioactive contaminants going into the ground water.

“Remember in 2000 when there was a release that we had to monitor and that we were concerned about?” asked Puglisi.

Foster joined Puglisi in her disappointment about not “having a seat at the table” in the re-licensing process. The NRC turned down requests of Puglisi and Foster to recognize their formal arguments about the plant’s continued operation.

The public comment period ends on March 18, 2009. After that the NRC will consider and address the comments received and issue a final supplement to the GEIS for Indian Point in February, 2010.

The draft supplement to the GEIS can be accessed at the NRC web page: www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/adams/web-based.html . The accession numbers of the Indian Point draft supplement are ML083540594 (Volume 1, Main Report) and ML083540614 (Volume 2, Appendices). In addition, the draft supplement is available for public inspection at following locations: The White Plains Public Library, 100 Martine Ave., White Plains, N.Y. ; the Hendrick Hudson Free Library, 185 Kings Ferry Road, Montrose, N.Y., and the Field Library, 4 Nelson Ave., Peekskill, N.Y.