

Residents Near Indian Point Plant Question Evacuation Plans

By ROBERT F. WORTH
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Before Sept. 11, people in New York City's northern suburbs used to crack jokes about the booklet they were mailed every year telling them what to do in the event of a disaster at the Indian Point nuclear power plant, about 30 miles north of the city on the Hudson River. With its colored maps and refrigerator magnet cheerfully reminding people where to go to escape radioactive fallout, the booklet seemed too absurd -- and the threat too unlikely -- to be frightening.

No one is laughing now. Over the last two months, residents and elected officials have been asking what would happen if terrorists were to strike Indian Point, in Buchanan, N.Y., where two operating reactors and three spent fuel pools sit in the most densely populated area around any nuclear plant in the country. Many say the government's evacuation plans are wildly impractical and could not even protect people who live close to the plant in the event of a major release of radiation, much less the 20 million people who live within a 50-mile radius.

The concern is prompting not just widespread worries about the evacuation plan but also something more: the most serious groundswell since the Three Mile Island accident in 1979 in favor of shutting down the plants.

Federal officials say a successful terrorist attack is exceedingly unlikely, and the Indian Point emergency plans, which involve the possible evacuation of people up to 10 miles downwind of the plant, have been approved by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, like those at the country's 81 other reactor sites. The plant has been heavily guarded since Sept. 11, with fatigue-clad National Guard troops standing watch and Coast Guard cutters patrolling the Hudson.

But those assurances mean little to the parents who want to know how they would find their children if a cloud of deadly radiation were to spread across the suburbs.

Under the emergency plan, officials in Westchester, Putnam, Rockland and Orange Counties would respond either by telling people to remain in their houses with the doors and windows closed, waiting for the radiation cloud to pass over, or evacuate. If an evacuation were to occur, the counties would begin by sending fleets of buses to pick up schoolchildren and people without cars within the evacuation zone and take them to reception centers beyond the 10-mile zone. Sirens and radio alerts would not start for the general public until after the evacuation of the children had begun, so that roads would remain clear for the buses, said Anthony Sutton, deputy commissioner of the Westchester County Department of Emergency Management.

Many parents and officials say word of a disaster would surely leak out before the evacuation plan could get going and the roads -- many of them clogged under normal circumstances -- would be packed with panicked drivers.

"The roads are jammed on ordinary days, and parents have told us that they would not wait and see if the bus drivers were willing to pick up their kids," said Michael B. Kaplowitz, a Westchester County legislator.

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Residents cited other concerns. "At some point I will have children in three different schools, going to three different reception areas," said Lisa Rodrigues, the president of the Lakeland School Board, whose district is partly within the 10-mile emergency planning zone. "Which one do I go to first?"

There are no plans for summer, when children are at local summer camps, she added. Also, most of the Lakeland district's bus drivers are women, yet women of child-bearing age are not allowed to participate in the evacuation.

In neighboring Putnam County, the evacuation route takes some people straight north into Dutchess County, and then back south to reception centers in the eastern part of Putnam -- where they might be directly in the path of radiation.

Even Alfred B. Del Bello, who helped write the original emergency plan as Westchester County executive in the early 1980's after the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island, said, "It doesn't work."

Mr. Del Bello, who also was New York State's lieutenant governor, added, "For the first time, I'm really worried about the plant."

The federal government also runs periodic tests of emergency readiness within what is called a 50-mile "ingestion plume pathway," where radiation levels are expected to be lower. Evacuation might be necessary in that broader area, which in Indian Point's case includes New York City, the reservoirs that supply its drinking water and parts of three other states. But because officials have always assumed that there would be more time for such a wider evacuation, it is not part of the emergency plan.

Doubts about the evacuation plan have contributed to a growing tide of fear over the last two months. Hundreds of parents have crowded into PTA meetings convened to discuss a possible evacuation, and many want potassium iodide, which was helpful in reducing thyroid cancer among children exposed to radiation during the Chernobyl accident in 1986, said Dr. Marjorie E. Castro, the superintendent of the Croton-Harmon school district, located a few miles from Indian Point. A number of local groups have flowered overnight to urge the plant's closing, including one that boasts a Web site with a lurid map showing the plant at the center of a 50-mile-wide blood-red circle.