

Wednesday, December 19, 2001

Inspectors to oversee crew at nuclear plant

By Mary Beth Pfeiffer
Poughkeepsie Journal

Government inspectors will be stationed round-the-clock at Indian Point 2 nuclear power plant in Westchester County until technicians prove they can safely operate the generating station, according to officials of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The highly unusual move, which came after four of seven control room crews failed recent qualifying tests, raises additional questions about the safety of the 500-megawatt nuclear power plant, located 30 miles south of Poughkeepsie.

The plant, which has the NRC's lowest rating of any nuclear station in the country, is the only one currently subjected to such intense government scrutiny.

"It's not a routine matter," said Neil Sheehan, a spokesman for the commission, which oversees the nation's 103 nuclear power plants.

"We take this very seriously," said James Steets, a spokesman for Entergy Corp., which owns and operates Indian Points 2 and 3, located in Buchanan on the Hudson River.

Three of the four failing crews have been retrained and have passed new tests, he said, adding that a fourth crew was "reconstituted" with new and old members.

Terror spotlights needs

Questions about Indian Point's safety and security have been raised since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, which highlighted the potential vulnerability of such nuclear facilities.

"It's a concern for anybody living in this valley and this general area," said Margaret White, a Town of Poughkeepsie resident, noting "the worst case scenario" if jets had crashed into the plant instead of the World Trade Center.

Indian Point 2 is the only plant in the country to get NRC's "multiple/repetitive degraded" rating, meaning it has been cited for key failures in several categories. The rating is one step short of being shut down.

While operating safety at the plant is at issue, state officials are attempting to reassure area residents that the plant is secure from attack.

New York State Office of Public Security Director James Kallstrom released an FBI analysis of plant security last week, which reinforced his belief, he said, that security is "robust."

"However," he added, "we have advanced a series of recommendations to bolster the overall security in light of the events of Sept. 11." These include more frequent security drills and better coordination with area police in the event of an emergency; Entergy agreed to adopt a "majority" of them, he said.

To critics like the Hudson Riverkeeper and Nuclear Control Institute, a Washington group that advocates increased nuclear oversight, the report was an indicator that security is wanting. The groups filed a petition with the NRC in November calling for immediate shutdown of the plant.

"Despite Kallstrom's conclusion that 'local residents should rest easy,'" said Riverkeeper Executive Director Alex Matthiessen, "Indian Point today is inadequately defended against a terrorist attack."

Entergy's Steets disputed that and said Riverkeeper has long sought the plant's closure.

"These plants are very durable plants, built to protect the community from anything that could happen in the reactor," he said. Closing them would mean the loss of \$350 million annually to the economy and 1,000 megawatts of electricity, he said. That's enough to power two million homes.

Robert Ostrander, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Sue Kelly, R-Katonah, who requested the NRC presence, said a shutdown is "premature."

"The good news is the plant is getting more attention than ever from the state and federal government," he said.

Inspectors will stay a while

NRC's Sheehan said government inspectors would remain at the plant through the weekend and possibly longer. They will monitor each crew for three 12-hour shifts and will leave only when they are convinced they are competent to operate the plant.

The NRC's action is based on qualifying tests administered by Entergy as part of government mandates to annually test and recertify operators.

Two of the four, five-member crews were cited for "competency failures" related to untimely responses to simulated emergencies, NRC documents show. The two other crews experienced "critical task failures" they failed to meet challenges presented by the test. In addition to crew failures, 10 of 44 individuals failed.

In an analysis of the test results, NRC's report states: "This issue is more than minor because greater than 20 percent of the crews failed and the conditions found reflected the potential inability of the crew to take appropriate safety-related actions."

The New Orleans-based Entergy Corp. bought Indian Point 2 in September from Consolidated Edison; it had earlier bought its sister plant, Indian Point 3, which gets the NRC's highest rating.

"This is a situation we inherited," said Steets.

David Lochbaum, an engineer with the Union of Concerned Scientists and a former Indian Point consultant, said the worst nuclear power plant accidents -- Three Mile Island in Harrisburg, Pa., and Chernobyl in the Ukraine -- were caused by poor operator performance.

Indian Point's last accident was in February 2000, when a steam generator tube ruptured, spilling radioactive coolant into a closed system and resulting in the plant's current rating.

[Special report on nuclear plant safety](#)

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