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Area unfazed by fears about Indian Point

February 21, 2002

Staff reports

Safety at the Indian Point nuclear power plant in Westchester County, N.Y., has been hotly debated since Sept. 11, but it's hardly caused a ripple in southwestern Connecticut.

Though the area is within the plant's 50-mile "peak injury zone," local residents and officials have not been part of a push to increase safety at the Buchanan, N.Y., plant or shut it down.

But the Stamford-Norwalk area would be directly affected should a terrorist attack or accident result in the release of radioactive material, scientists and activists say.

"If there were an accident, the winds would likely send the radiation toward the east," said David Lochbaum, a nuclear safety engineer at the Cambridge, Mass.-based Union of Concerned Scientists. Reactors at Indian Point 2 and 3 each generate about 1,000 megawatts of electricity when running at full power. An attack could cause the plant's fuel – essentially radioactive steam – to explode, with radiation spreading beyond the 10-mile emergency zone established in the facility's 2,000-page evacuation plan.

Concerns about the possibility of a catastrophic accident or attack at the plant increased dramatically after the Sept. 11 attacks. Such fears were given further credence by President Bush's State of the Union address last month that indicated terrorists had diagrams of American nuclear power plants.

More than 7,000 New Yorkers, 40 organizations, 30 municipalities and dozens of state legislators in the Empire State are engaged in a battle to shut down Indian Point.

But in Connecticut, there have been no organized efforts to stop the plant's operations.

"This (issue) has been raised; it's an issue in our emergency planning," said Greenwich First Selectman Richard Bergstresser, whose town is 23 miles from the plant. "On the priority list, it's not very high."

Federal guidelines allow up to 432 gallons of fuel to leak per day before the plant is considered unsafe. But a report of small radioactive leaks at the plant earlier this month – deemed "insignificant" by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission because it was emitting only 0.04 gallons of fuel per day – generated new fears among some New Yorkers.

"We've gotten into huge problems before and now it looks like we're heading into huge trouble again," said Stephen Kent, coordinator of the Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition, referring to an incident two years ago in which a radioactive generator leak closed the plant for nine months. The coalition consists of 40 groups working to close the plant.

A federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission study determined that, in the event of disaster, the area within 17.5 miles of the plant would be considered the "peak kill zone," Kent said. The area within 50 miles would be considered the "peak injury zone."

"What that means is, at 50 miles out, (people) would take in enough radiation dosage to get a lethal cancer," Kent said.

Even though communities all the way to New Haven could be affected, the plant has only a 10-mile evacuation plan, Kent said. Roads and highways could not handle the traffic if residents were to flee, he said.

"What Fairfield County residents need to realize is there is not an evacuation plan beyond the 10-mile zone, and if it does happen, it'll be a huge problem," Kent said. "Nobody would be able to get anywhere."

Emergency officials, however, note that Greenwich, Stamford, Darien and New Canaan, which make up the Southwest Connecticut Local Emergency Planning Area, have plans in place.

Whether it's a nuclear-powered satellite dropping out of the sky, an accident involving the transportation of radioactive material or an incident at Indian Point,

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the area has a plan, said police Capt. Thomas Lombardo, Stamford's emergency management director.

It includes radiation detection equipment at different sites throughout the area, and decontamination and evacuation plans, Lombardo said.

Though towns up to 50 miles away would likely be affected only if the plant had an "absolute total complete God-awful disaster," radioactive material drifting aloft is a concern, he said.

"We knew it can get here because of the fires at Bear Mountain a couple of years ago," Lombardo said, referring to the smoke from forest fires at the New York state park on the opposite side of the Hudson River from the plant.

Officials at the NRC and Entergy Inc., which operates the plant, say the building is well guarded from terrorists.

"Our containment building is built for the exact purpose of containing tremendous forces, and these same qualities will enable it to withstand tremendous forces from the outside," company spokesman Jim Steets said.

The plant employs about 1,500 workers and supplies enough electricity for up to 2 million homes, he said. It provides 20 percent to 30 percent of the electricity for New York City and Westchester County.

Lochbaum said the two spent fuel pools at the plant -- each containing about 600 tons of fuel -- are more vulnerable to terrorist attacks than the reactors because they are in a building that is easier to enter. The mock attacks used to prepare plant workers for emergencies do not involve spent fuel pools, Lochbaum said, so the pools' safety has not been challenged.

"One of the concerns is, if you're a terrorist, you wouldn't go after the thick parts, you'd go after the Achilles heel," Lochbaum said.

Steets said the pools are just as secure as the reactors because they also are protected by thick concrete buildings. The pools are mostly underground and have about 27 feet of water above them, which serves as a shield, he said.

But some New Yorkers do not feel safe.

Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano recently asked for more than 500,000 potassium iodide tablets, which thwart thyroid cancer induced by radiation, are given without charge to residents who live within 10 miles of the plant.

Lombardo said federal officials have assured municipalities that the tablets could be transported to the area "in a matter of hours" should they become needed.

-- Staff Writers Kevin McCallum and Vesna Jaksic and The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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