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Entergy defends N.Y. plant

Ad campaign fires at 'anti-nuclear' group

By [SARA BONGIORNI](#)
Advocate business writer

Entergy Corp. is running advertisements in the New York Times and other New York newspapers to counter pressure from politicians and public interest groups who say its Indian Point nuclear plant 35 miles north of Manhattan poses a target for terrorists and should be shut down.

Plant opponents say a serious accident at the Indian Point nuclear complex could force the evacuation of 20 million people living within 50 miles of it, including the population of New York City.

New Orleans-based Entergy insists the Buchanan, N.Y., plant, whose acquisition it completed last year, can continue to operate safely "under the specter of future terrorist attacks." It says anti-nuclear groups are taking advantage of post-Sept. 11 fears to advance a longstanding political agenda.

Entergy operates two nuclear power plants on the Mississippi River in Louisiana: River Bend and the Waterford 3 plant in St. Charles Parish.

Entergy also operates the Grand Gulf nuclear plant in Claiborne County, Miss., across the Mississippi River from Tensas Parish.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, Entergy stepped up security at its Louisiana nuclear plants under provisions mandated by the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

In a Public Service Commission hearing in September, an Entergy official was asked if the nuclear units could withstand a terrorist attack similar to the hijacked airplanes that hit the World Trade Center towers in New York and at the Pentagon.

PSC members were told the plants could "take a direct hit from a (Boeing) 747" and that the nuclear plants' walls are concrete 18-feet thick.

Entergy spokeswoman Kelle Barfield said from Jackson, Miss., where Entergy's nuclear arm is headquartered, that concerns of the plant opponents in New York are not new.

"You have people who are fundamentally opposed to nuclear power and have been since its inception 30 or 40 years ago," she said.

The head of one of the groups spearheading the grassroots campaign rejected the anti-nuke label.

"These are specific concerns about a specific plant," said Alex Matthiessen, executive director of Riverkeeper Inc., a not-for-profit group that has battled Indian Point for years over its impact on fish populations in the Hudson River. "After Sept. 11, it became clear that this is a sitting bull's eye."

Among anti-Indian Point groups' claims: an evacuation plan approved by Gov. George Pataki for the 10-mile zone around the complex doesn't account for clogged roads and could leave children stranded at schools.

Matthiessen said he is certain the plant eventually will be shuttered.

"I'm confident that will happen," he said.

That would be an unprecedented step for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which has never permanently closed a plant's operations. Groups opposed to Indian Point's continued operation have filed a petition with the NRC asking it to do just that.

Barfield said it's unlikely that will happen because Indian Point is safe.

"I don't believe the petitioners will be able to prove it's not operating safely because it's not true," she said.

In the fall, the federal NRC announced it was beginning a top-to-bottom review of safety measures surrounding all of the nation's 103 nuclear reactors. In the meantime, a variety of security measures, including the use of National Guard troops, have been stepped up at the plants.

Entergy spent more than \$1 billion to acquire Indian Point's assets in deals made in 2000 and 2001. The complex, which contains two active, 1,000-megawatt reactors and a third inactive one, is not part of Entergy's utility system but belongs to a unit of the company that sells power on the open market at unregulated rates.

As a result, Entergy's spending on the ad campaign will have no impact on its utility customers in Louisiana and elsewhere, Barfield said. She said she did not know how much the company has spent so far on newspaper ads and radio spots, which will continue indefinitely.

Barfield said the company took the unusual step of pursuing a "printed war of words" because Entergy's perspective wasn't getting fair play in the New York area's editorial pages.

"There was no alternative because we couldn't get proper balance in some cases," Barfield said. "We had to get correct information out there."

Entergy's advertisements in the Times and other papers say the plant has extensive safeguards to protect against an attack. One ad says there would be no nuclear explosion even if an airplane did crash into the complex.

Other ads focus on potential economic impacts of an Indian Point closure. Entergy claims closing the plant, which supplies as much as 30 percent of New York City's electricity, would cause price spikes of up to 40 percent and prompt rolling blackouts like those caused by California's energy crunch.

Closing the plant also would mean the loss of \$34 million in local taxes and the facility's 1,500 jobs, one ad says.

Another describes Indian Point's dome-shaped reactor buildings as among the strongest in the world.

Barfield said concern about a possible terrorist attack on Indian Point has been vocal because of its proximity to New York City and its location in a densely populated area.

"I do think there is a greater sensitivity to the threat of terrorism in the New York area because ... many of these people knew people who died in the World Trade Center and have seen firsthand the devastation that took place," she said.

Matthiessen rejects Entergy's arguments about the plant's ability to withstand a terrorist attack and its claims regarding economic impact. He said New England has a surplus of power that could serve the area, one reason a comparison to California doesn't make sense.

He said Entergy has a better commitment to safety than former owner Consolidated Edison but that its location in a densely populated area makes the plant a dangerous target for terrorists.

"The question is, is anything the company does enough in case of a terrorist attack?" he said. "We categorically say, 'No way.'"

Matthiessen also said the complex has a history of problems, most concerning its Indian Point 2 reactor. He noted that the reactor is the only one in the nation with a "red" designation from the NRC, the agency's most serious rating for safety concerns.

Neil Sheehan, an NRC spokesman, confirmed that Indian Point 2 is the only reactor with the red rating. But he said the color-based rating system has only been in place a short time -- since April 2000 -- and that some other facilities also have red ratings pending.

An important factor in the rating is a February 2000 incident involving a tube failure in Indian Point 2's steam generator. The tube burst, sending a small amount of radioactive steam into the atmosphere.

