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NRC UPDATES PUBLIC ON INDIAN POINT SPENT FUEL STORAGE PLANS

PEEKSKILL, N.Y. – The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff, in a meeting this evening with members of the public, stressed that a dry cask storage facility for spent fuel planned for the Indian Point nuclear power plant will be subject to rigorous reviews by the agency before it is allowed to operate.

In addition, NRC officials said inspections will be conducted to ensure the facility meets stringent agency requirements with regard to safety and security of the units.

“The NRC takes very seriously its responsibility of protecting public health and safety,” said Larry W. Camper, Deputy Director of the Licensing and Inspection Directorate in the NRC’s Spent Fuel Project Office. “We will be vigilant in our regulatory oversight of the Indian Point dry cask storage facility and make sure the units are in compliance with all relevant requirements before being placed into service.”

Indian Point’s owner, Entergy, notified the NRC late last year of its intention to build a dry cask storage facility at the Buchanan, N.Y., plant. The company plans to install the facility under a “general license,” an option that permits a plant to make use of certain evaluations, such as environmental impact or seismic reviews, conducted when the plant was originally licensed. Provided that a dry cask storage system already certified by the NRC is used, plant owners do not need a separate approval from the agency. Nevertheless, such facilities are subject to a series of reviews by the NRC.

The type of dry cask unit that Entergy plans to use at Indian Point is already in service at eight U.S. nuclear power plant sites. Other facilities are also considering using that model. The NRC has certified the safety of the model, the Hi-Storm 100 vertical cask, after detailed technical and engineering evaluations. Prior to NRC certification of the Hi-Storm 100 for use under a general license in May 2000, there was an opportunity for members of the public to raise any concerns they might have about the model’s safety.

Camper said the NRC will independently evaluate the plant's ability to safely operate a dry cask storage facility. In the long term, the NRC will continue to check on the qualifications of personnel assigned to dry cask operations, security of the facility, environmental monitoring and maintenance.

He also noted that the NRC has been proactive in ensuring the security of spent fuel storage facilities, including dry cask storage units. This has been achieved through compliance with existing NRC security standards, the issuance of security orders and advisories, regular inspections and the performance of vulnerability assessments. Collectively, these measures ensure that spent fuel can be stored safely and securely.

In addition to Camper, several other NRC officials spoke at the meeting, held at Crystal Bay on the Hudson. Ron Bellamy, an NRC branch chief who oversees inspections of dry cask facilities, addressed specific areas that would be reviewed by the agency before the facility is used, including oversight of the design of the units, their fabrication, pre-operational demonstrations and operational activities.

Dry cask storage is currently in use at about 30 nuclear power plant sites across the nation. The NRC considers both dry cask storage and spent fuel pools to be safe and acceptable alternatives for the storage of spent fuel.

With the dry cask storage option, fuel is removed from a circulating-water spent fuel pool after a sufficient period of cooling time has elapsed and placed inside robust stainless-steel casks. Those casks are then sealed, filled with an inert gas and placed inside specially designed storage "overpacks," in the case of Indian Point cylindrical vaults made of steel-reinforced concrete. Convective air flow through vents at the top and bottom of the units helps ensure that the fuel remains properly cooled. The units must be capable of resisting floods, tornadoes, projectiles, temperature extremes and other unusual scenarios.

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