

July 4, 2003 Friday

**SECTION:** NEWS; Pg. 1A

**LENGTH:** 819 words

**HEADLINE:** In disaster, call may go out to just stay put

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**BODY:**

Evacuation doubted during fast-breaking nuclear catastrophe

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The Journal News

A new study showing it will take nearly twice as long to evacuate people from the 10-mile region around Indian Point as previously believed has led officials in Westchester and Rockland counties to conclude they could not evacuate residents following a fast-breaking catastrophe at the nuclear power plants.

Instead, officials said yesterday, they may have to ask everyone to stay in their homes, jobs and schools while radioactive clouds pass over the area.

The emergency plans developed for the four counties around the plants in Buchanan have relied on an evacuation time estimate study prepared in 1994 by consultants to Consolidated Edison, which previously owned Indian Point 2. That traffic study, using demographic data from the 1990 census, predicted it would take 2y hours for nearly 300,000 residents and workers to mobilize and take to the road, and a total of 5y hours for everyone to be evacuated.

But new transportation estimates prepared last month by the Commack, Long Island, firm of KLD Associates for Entergy Nuclear Northeast, which now owns Indian Point, predicts it can take up to four hours for residents to mobilize and up to 10 hours to evacuate the region in good weather. Traffic congestion from "shadow evacuations," people who flee the region from outside the 10-mile zone, would increase those times, the report found.

A decision by regional officials to order everyone to stay in place and not attempt an evacuation would first come from Westchester County, which has the lead role in emergency planning for the nuclear site.

"In a fast-breaking terrorist scenario, it may be more prudent to ask people to shelter in place rather than put them on the roadways," said Tony Sutton, Westchester's deputy commissioner of emergency services. "The protection offered by residences exceeds that offered by a car. We would tell them to stay inside and minimize their sources of outside air, and we would tell them to take potassium iodide. We would not have time to set up for an evacuation."

Sutton said that after the radiation source is capped - hours or days after an incident, depending on the severity - "you can instruct people to evacuate via a certain route, and try to minimize their exposure to radiation."

"In an immediate emergency, we don't have the capacity in resources or roads to effect an immediate evacuation," Sutton said.

Dan Greeley, Rockland County's assistant director of fire and emergency services, said that in a terrorist scenario, "we would probably tell the schools and public to shelter in place."

"If there is a fast-moving release, our emergency operations center wouldn't even be open," Greeley said. "The resources wouldn't be in place to handle an evacuation. The reception centers would not even be open. You have to be able to mobilize your resources - the Office of Emergency Services, the police forces, the hospitals - and those would not be ready."

Greeley said that while emergency plans have always envisioned the possibility of fast-breaking scenarios - where radiation is released within an hour or two - those have been accidents of short duration where the public was unaware of unfolding events.

"Some people think a terrorism plan isn't going to be any different from any other fast-moving scenario," Greeley said. "But they are kidding themselves. People will act differently. Some will definitely panic, and there will be people on the road."

Entergy spokesman Jim Steets said a meltdown in either the reactor or the spent fuel pools at Indian Point would take several hours to develop, leaving plenty of time for an orderly evacuation from the region.

"A fast-breaking event takes an awful lot of time before radiation affected the limited area of the emergency planning zone," Steets said. "The fact of the matter is, you can obviously evacuate parts of the region in much less time."

Steets said it was unlikely any event - an accident or terrorist attack - could cause a radiation release in less than eight or 10 hours.

"We still have three layers of defense in depth that would take time to be broken down before there is a release of radiation," he said.

A 2001 Nuclear Regulatory Commission study of possible meltdowns in spent fuel pools said that massive amounts of radiation could be emitted from a site in as little as an hour.

Assemblyman Richard Brodsky, D-Greenburgh, said the counties' acknowledgement that no evacuation is possible in a fast-breaking emergency means current evacuation plans are useless.

"It means the only thing that will really happen is that they will tell everybody to stay home," he said. "It's not an honest emergency plan anymore. It used to be just a bad plan. Now, it's a bad, dishonest plan."

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