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HEADLINE: Top rating for Indian Point 2, 3

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Improvements mean less need for intense scrutiny, NRC says

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Federal officials for the first time have rated both Indian Point nuclear power plants as among the best run in the country, citing improvements in plant equipment and operations.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, in its year-end assessment of inspection results from the twin plants in Buchanan, yesterday gave them a "green" safety rating, the agency's highest. The rating means the plants will receive less intense oversight than they have had for the past two years.

NRC officials cautioned that plant-owner Entergy Nuclear Northeast still has much work to do to fix design flaws, reduce repair backlogs and improve staff performance, particularly at Indian Point 3.

But the agency praised Entergy for improving conditions, particularly at Indian Point 2, which was considered the least safe and poorest run of the nation's 103 operating nuclear plants when Entergy purchased Indian Point in 2001.

"It is a positive step for them," said Brian Holian, deputy director of the NRC's division of reactor projects for the Northeast region. "It is a milestone, but they still have a lot on their plate."

Indian Point had been the most problematic of the 10 nuclear plants owned and operated by the Louisiana-based Entergy Corp. All the others have green ratings by the NRC.

"Green is the color you would want every one of our plants to be," company spokeswoman Kelle Barfield said. "That's our goal and we have the people skills and plant processes to help us achieve those green findings."

Officials from Entergy Nuclear Northeast could not be reached yesterday or did not return phone calls.

Critics questioned the validity of the new rating, given that the NRC also acknowledged the plants still have performance problems.

"A green designation, which is the agency's highest, should be reserved for only those nuclear plants that have a clean bill of health," said Alex Matthiessen, director of the environmental group Riverkeeper, which has called for closing the plants. "I don't know how they square the ongoing maintenance and repair and safety problems at the plant with their gold-star rating."

Matthiessen said that the NRC was "whitewashing" problems at the plants and that "it seems suspicious to me that they could go from the least safe plant in the country to having the highest designation in such a short period."

Marilyn Elie, head of the Westchester Citizens Awareness Network, agreed. "It seems to me that the celebration is a bit premature as long as serious problems remain at Indian Point 2 and Indian Point 3 with their repair backlog and wiring," she said.

Since Entergy purchased Indian Point, the plants have experienced some of their most intense scrutiny following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Entergy has pumped more than \$500 million into equipment and training improvements as it tried to install a single set of operating standards for the site. Indian Point 2 was purchased from Consolidated Edison and Indian Point 3 from the New York Power Authority.

The NRC maintains a color-coded rating system for the results of its inspections; green represents the highest level of performance. The ratings then descend through white and yellow to red as the least safe designation.

Indian Point 2 received the red designation following a Feb. 15, 2000, rupture of a tube in the reactor's steam generator, triggering a spill of more than 20,000 gallons of contaminated water inside the plant and the release of a small amount of radioactive steam into the atmosphere and some radioactive water into the Hudson River.

The plant was shut for 10 months while the aging steam generators were replaced. The red designation was removed at the end of August 2002, but the plant then received a white designation for an improper fire wall in the control room. That finding was removed in December of last year.

Indian Point 2 received a yellow performance rating in fall 2001 after a majority of control-room operators failed their annual relicensing exam. That finding was removed in June 2003 after a new training program was instituted and the crews passed their exams.

The NRC uses the same color code for a series of performance standards that are automatically imposed if a nuclear plant crosses a certain threshold. Both plants received white performance indicators in the fall, for example, because of seven unplanned shutdowns, an amount deemed excessive by the NRC. A critical NRC report in December blamed the shutdowns on poor maintenance and lax oversight of contractors by Entergy.

But yesterday, Holian said Entergy had improved its oversight of its electrical systems and the white designation, too, would be removed at the end of this month.

"It has been a long time since both plants had no adverse findings," Holian said. "It is a milestone for the utility."

Holian said the NRC gave Entergy credit for improving the overall performance by its employees. But at Indian Point 3, he said, "they had a rash of errors crop up, especially during refueling outages, and it remains a challenge to them."

In addition, he said, "they have continuing issues with consistency and thoroughness."

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What the rating means

- * The Nuclear Regulatory Commission will reduce the intense oversight given to the plants' during the past years.

- * Entergy has 30 days to provide a written report on how it will reduce its repair backlog and correct electrical systems not in compliance with the plants' license documents.

NRC findings

- * Indian Point 2 and 3 last year "operated in a manner that preserved public health and safety."

- * A "yellow" inspection finding assessed against Indian Point 2 in 2001 after a majority of control-room operators failed their annual operating test was removed in May in recognition of improved training and performance.

- * A "white" inspection finding assessed against Indian Point 2 in August 2002 for incorrectly repairing a fire wall was removed in December 2003.

- * A "white" performance indicator assessed against both plants in the fall for an unacceptably high number of unplanned shutdowns will be removed at the end of the quarter because of improvements to their electrical systems and maintenance.

- * Both plants show improvements in personnel performance, though there was a "relatively large number of personnel errors" during the refueling at Indian Point 3. Personnel performance at Indian Point 2 is no longer an issue.

From shaky to solid

- * Feb. 15, 2000: Indian Point 2's owner at the time, Consolidated Edison, declares the first emergency alert in the plant's history. A tube in one of four steam generators leaks 20,000 gallons of radioactive water into the plant. Small amount of radioactive gas escapes into the atmosphere.

- * Nov. 9: Consolidated Edison announces pending sale of Indian Point 1 and 2 to Entergy Corp. for \$607 million. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission approves the license transfer of Indian Point 3 to Entergy from the New York Power Authority.

- * Nov. 20: Indian Point 2 becomes the first nuclear power plant in the country to receive a "red" designation, the lowest safety rating given by the NRC.
- * Jan. 30, 2001: NRC completes 2000 inspection report showing continued problems with safety and the tendency to fix problems as they happen without looking for their cause.
- * September to October: Four of seven control-room teams fail relicensing exam. "Yellow" designation assessed against Entergy.
- * June to July 2002: Special inspection by nine-member NRC team to determine if "red" designation should be lifted.
- * Aug. 30, 2002: "Red" designation lifted; "white" designation added for improper fire wall.
- * June 2003: "Yellow" designation removed after control room operators pass licensing exams.
- * December: "White" designation for fire wall violation lifted.
- * March 8, 2004: NRC announces that Indian Point 2 and 3 have been rated as "green," the agency's highest safety rating.