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EVACUATION

Drill will test response to an incident at Indian Point, but some scoff at effectiveness

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The Journal News

BUCHANAN - On Tuesday morning, the instruments in a control room at Indian Point 2 will show something very, very wrong. Then, things will only get worse.

Before the day is half over, the nuclear power plant's operators will lose control of more than 400,000 gallons of coolant. The reactor core will turn into a nuclear, molten slag, which will melt through the reactor's steel liner and drop into the pool of coolant water on the huge containment building's floor.

The force of the resulting steam explosion will burst through the building, threatening people in four counties with wind-borne radioactive contamination.

At that point, the emergency response teams of Westchester, Rockland, Putnam and Orange counties and the State Emergency Management Office will begin trying to protect as many residents as possible. They will have to evacuate everyone who may be in the path of the radiation cloud, control all traffic in the region, set up emergency evacuation centers, safely remove children from schools and shut-ins from hospitals and nursing homes, and treat contamination victims in special hospital facilities and emergency centers.

The emergency will not be real, but the stakes will be high.

County, state and Indian Point officials will attempt to prove to federal regulators that the more than 300,000 residents within 10 miles of the nuclear plants could be safely protected or evacuated in the event of a real radiation emergency. Federal regulators will also try to assure the public that the exercise - a biannual drill of the counties' emergency evacuation plans - is a valid measure of the level of protection the public can expect.

"The purpose is to show that, should there be a real emergency, we can protect the public health and safety," said Susan Tolchin, chief adviser to Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano. "Which we can do."

The drill, which uses a relatively small number of people to simulate the interactions of thousands from scores of organizations, has come under increasing criticism since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. It has been looked at as an ineffective tool to test how well emergency workers and law enforcement officials could safely evacuate thousands of frightened people.

Of late, critics have cited the official analysis of the response to the Trade Center disaster by New York City firefighters and police as an example of the Indian Point drill's deficiencies. The study found that many of these first responders died needlessly because of a lack of individual training and coordination between agencies.

"Our analysis of the police and fire response recommends full training and drills and simulations for all personnel, not just representatives or officers," said Andrew Giangola, spokesman for McKinsey and Co., the consulting firm that analyzed New York City's response on Sept. 11. "This is to ensure that procedures are known and followed by all of those who will be responding to a catastrophe. The city faces a new reality, new levels of threats that necessitate new levels of training done more realistically."

The regional emergency response plans for Indian Point have not significantly changed in recent years, and do not take into account the kind of terrorist attack that felled the Twin Towers, or an attack on the pool of spent fuel elsewhere on the plant's property.

Tuesday's drill will focus on the response to a particular area that would be contaminated based on prevailing winds, which will be selected by testers the day of the exercise. Westchester will need to show that it can evacuate residents within a mile of the plant and along the path of the radioactive cloud. If the wind route takes the radiation into Putnam or Rockland counties, they will also have to test their evacuation plans.

Controllers who face the mock crisis will not operate the real reactor, but will work in an identical simulator room fighting a series of nuclear problems thrown at them by those running the drill.

The test is to ensure that Indian Point meets its federal license requirement to have a realistic emergency plan in place. How well the agencies involved interact and respond to the simulated emergency will be evaluated by teams of 52 inspectors from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and 20 inspectors from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

NRC inspectors will monitor actions within the plant to determine how well control room operators and other plant personnel respond to their various challenges and communicate with outside agencies.

That part of the drill is of particular significance to Entergy Nuclear Northeast, which purchased Indian Point 2 last September, and has had to deal with poorly trained staff at virtually every level. The plant has a "yellow" designation by the NRC, the

agency's second-lowest safety rating, because four of its seven control room crews failed their annual licensing exams in October. Entergy has since instituted new training programs for the entire staff in an effort to upgrade performance.

NRC documents obtained by The Journal News show that, since 1995, Indian Point 2 has had difficulty passing parts of its emergency drills or properly responding to real problem situations because of employees' inability to correctly identify the cause of equipment or system malfunctions.

The regulatory agency's most recent cause for concern in the area of emergency preparedness was the plant's Feb. 15, 2000, steam generator tube failure, which resulted in the leak of 20,000 gallons of radioactive coolant in the plant and a small release of contaminated gas into the atmosphere.

Two members of the NRC team that investigated the accident criticized the plant's response and wrote in a March 30, 2000, memo that, "We are uncertain that the licensee could protect public health and safety during a significant radiological emergency because of the difficulties demonstrated by the licensee in implementing their emergency plan ? Given the history of the licensee's various communication breakdowns, procedural deficiencies, qualification lapses, poor personnel coordination and weak technical support, we conclude that the outcome of the licensee's response to a challenging emergency would be uncertain."

"We have seen some improvement, but they still have a way to go," NRC spokesman Neil Sheehan said recently. "Entergy has devoted a lot of resources to try to address these problems, including mentoring control room operators, improving their training and providing better equipment. They are taking steps to get at the root of these problems, but they do take time. This will be a good test."

Mike Slobodien, Entergy's director of emergency programs, said training has been completely changed at the plant.

"We do not tell them what is wrong," he said. "We only tell them symptoms. They have to use the proper diagnostic equipment, make the appropriate tests and only then do they get the information allowing them to go to the next step. The objective is to demonstrate they can figure out what is going on."

Tuesday's drill is the largest in a series of tests designed to examine the region's overall emergency response capabilities. Other reviews conducted earlier this summer examined the ability of hospitals to set up isolation treatment areas to care for contaminated or injured victims, whether reception centers could hold school children and other evacuees, and whether systems were in place to protect food, livestock and water sources.

In Putnam, for example, FEMA evaluated a four-hour drill designed to show that ambulance crews and Putnam Hospital Center were equipped to handle a person contaminated by radiation.

Officials representing 23 state agencies and Gov. George Pataki's office will participate in Tuesday's drill from the State Emergency Management Office in Albany. At Westchester's emergency command center in the county office building in White Plains, the top two officials of each county department will join Spano in the drill. During the past year, Tolchin said, more than 1,500 county employees have

participated in emergency training at a cost of more than \$4.6 million. The county received \$412,500 from Entergy for emergency planning and training.

The decisions made by officials during the drill will not actually be carried out by anyone. There will be no police barricades set up, no sample evacuations, no mock victims treated at hospitals. There will be field monitoring teams that will be sent out to take radiation readings at various points in each county.

Each participating police and fire department will have a representative talking about their responsibilities, said Robert Reynolds of FEMA's National Preparedness Division. For example, he said, a traffic control point might be selected in Croton-on-Hudson and the designated officer from that department would go to the spot, where he would be interviewed by FEMA testers.

"He would not be graded on his travel time," Reynolds said, "but on whether or not he understands his responsibilities."

The officer would then explain how he would set up barricades and direct traffic away from the advancing radiation cloud. That discussion would represent how the entire Croton Police Department would effectively deal with all traffic through its area. Similarly, an interview with a police officer in Nyack could represent traffic control for all of Route 9W or the Palisades Parkway.

Dennis Michulski, a SEMO spokesman, said the drill was primarily "a full-scale decision-making exercise. During an emergency, all state agencies are available. But the idea here is to present problems and test how the answers to those problems are worked out in a timely manner."

While a key element of any evacuation is transportation, that, too, will be simulated. Calls will be made to bus companies at the time they would be contacted during a real emergency, but no buses will actually hit the road.

Nor will the public be involved in any aspect of the drill, a lack of participation that also has critics wondering how the counties can accurately predict how residents would react during a true emergency.

William Waugh, a professor of public administration and urban studies at Georgia State University and a specialist in urban emergency response, said exercises such as the Indian Point drill assume the public will follow instructions in the event of a real emergency.

"Under the best of circumstances that doesn't happen," he said. "People don't do what they are told. We don't respond to authority the way we used to. If a drill is to be effective, (planners) have to pay much more attention to involving the public than they are used to.

"But FEMA drills and those of very few agencies are built to involve the public," he said. "They have a law enforcement and military orientation, and human factors are not necessarily considered. Yet everyone in emergency management knows that some people will comply, and some people won't. In real emergencies, there are a lot of people who do not follow directions and are injured or killed. You can't assume that people will get in their car and go when you say go, or go only where you want them to go."

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