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NRC analysis says backup generators failed in blackout

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Poor maintenance and the lax oversight of contractors contributed to an excessive number of sudden shutdowns at the Indian Point nuclear power plants the past 18 months, according to an analysis released yesterday by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Federal inspectors also found that during the blackout of Aug. 14, which forced the shutdown of nine nuclear reactors in several states, backup diesel generators at both Indian Point 2 and 3 were inoperable. As a result, the plants' owner did not have a way to provide continuous cooling power to its emergency centers or power for equipment needed to operate its emergency evacuation plan.

The NRC's inspection was prompted by the seven shutdowns at Indian Point in 2002 and 2003. The NRC inspects nuclear plants if they have more than three unplanned shutdowns during the course of 18 months. Though Indian Point 3 had five of the unplanned shutdowns, the NRC examined both plants because of similar electrical and maintenance issues.

Entergy Nuclear Northeast, which owns the plants in Buchanan, declined to comment on the NRC report.

Ed Lyman, senior scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists in Washington, D.C., called the failure of the backup systems "one of the most serious scenarios that a nuclear plant can experience. If you lose both on-site power and off-site power, then all you have left are the batteries, and they run out after a very short period of time."

During the blackout, Entergy shut off all remaining emergency-response equipment and computer systems at Indian Point 3 to prevent them from overheating.

What was important about these failures, the NRC report states, is that a significant amount of emergency-response equipment necessary to implement the region's emergency plans had to be shut off by Entergy at the outset of a regional power

crisis. Entergy combined its emergency operations for the two plants at Indian Point 2, the report states, and was able to obtain sufficient power to operate that plant's equipment in about two hours.

At both plants, NRC inspectors found, the problems with the backup systems were avoidable. The Indian Point 3 generators had failed during a test in April 2003, but the problems were not corrected. Problems with the Indian Point 2 backup generators were identified in February 2000, after the rupture of a steam-generator tube caused 20,000 gallons of contaminated water to leak inside the plant. That accident resulted in the plant's shutdown for 10 months.

During its recent month-long inspection, the NRC found that Indian Point 2's backup diesel generator was not strong enough to do the job required without overheating, but it had not been replaced or augmented and failed again when suddenly activated during the blackout.

In a written statement issued the day of the blackout, Entergy said that when the power shut down, "the plants' backup diesel generators automatically turned on to provide sufficient electrical power on site."

Kyle Rabin, of the environmental group Riverkeeper, a staunch Indian Point opponent, said the conflict between Entergy's statement during the blackout and the NRC's findings "raises a credibility issue with Entergy and everyone concerned about the public health and safety should take note of it. Our elected officials have every reason to call for the closure of this plant."

NRC spokesman Neil Sheehan said that as a result of its shutdowns, Indian Point 3's safety rating was lowered from green to white, the second best in a four-color system, with red indicating the least safe operations. Indian Point 2 received a red designation following the Feb. 15, 2000, accident. That designation was lifted last year, and the plant now has a white designation.

Sheehan said the NRC was concerned about continued performance problems by Entergy at Indian Point. But, he said, "they are moving to get these issues resolved. We have seen evidence since this summer that they have been doing a better job, and we will do an early assessment of their progress next year."

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Highlights

- * Poor maintenance and insufficient contractor oversight contributed to circuit breaker failures Nov. 15, 2002, and June 22, 2003.
- * Lack of thorough evaluations and corrective actions resulted in errors by Indian Point 2 reactor operators and shutdowns at both plants.
- * Overloading caused the failure of Indian Point 2 and 3's backup diesel generators in the Aug. 14 blackout. Indian Point 3's backup generator failed a test April 18 and the problem was not corrected.
- * Entergy did not have a preventive-maintenance plan in place to ensure that

emergency power supplies, which provide backup power to emergency response equipment, functioned regularly.