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993 trucks would take Indian Point's waste over Tappan Zee Bridge

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The U.S. Department of Energy, in addition to using the Hudson River, plans to transport more than 1,600 tons of radioactive material from Indian Point in Buchanan to Nevada on 993 trucks routed through the western part of Westchester County.

The truck shipments are to begin around 2010, when a proposed national repository for nuclear waste is expected to open under Yucca Mountain in Nevada. The shipments would be the first in a two-part effort to remove the estimated 1,600 tons of radioactive spent fuel currently at Indian Point and an additional 2,000 tons of nuclear waste that is expected to be created between now and the scheduled closing of the two power plants in the late 2030s.

The spent fuel to be created in later years will either be shipped by barge down the Hudson River to rail yards at Port Elizabeth, N.J., or taken in special "heavy-haul trucks" through local streets to the Conrail tracks in Croton-on-Hudson.

"Over my dead body will I allow spent fuel rods to be transported by truck through our local roads and communities without definitive assurances that Westchester residents will be safe and not put at risk," Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano said yesterday, after being told of the DOE plan.

The final transportation routes proposed by the Energy Department in its Yucca Mountain plan were completed in mid-February but have not been published. The state of Nevada was allowed yesterday to retrieve the restricted routing information from the Oak Ridge National Laboratories, where it was developed, as part of its 60-day review of the DOE proposal. Nevada officials shared the data with The Journal News.

Until yesterday, the only known part of the Energy Department's plan for Indian Point was its intent to ship casks of spent fuel rods on barges down the Hudson, then transfer them to trains that would take the material to Nevada. The Energy Department declined to comment yesterday.

The federal government has been looking for a permanent site for spent nuclear fuel since 1982, and settled on Yucca Mountain as the most practical and geologically safe location. The DOE has resisted talking with local governments about its transportation plans until Yucca Mountain is officially designated the nation's nuclear waste repository. President Bush recommended the site to Congress on Feb. 15, and Nevada has 60 days to disapprove, which it is expected to do. Congress would then have 90 days to overrule Nevada's veto.

In all, the government hopes to move some 77,000 tons of the nation's high-level radioactive waste from spent fuel for storage in massive dry casks under the mountain. That waste would constitute less than half of the total volume of material to be shipped. Most of what would be shipped to Yucca Mountain would be lower-level radioactive waste from the spent fuel.

Under the Energy Department plan for Indian Point, the 993 trucks that would begin moving through Westchester in 2010 are 70 feet long and carry loads of up to 80,000 pounds. They would travel on Routes 9 and 9A through Buchanan, Cortlandt, Croton, Ossining, Briarcliff Manor, Sleepy Hollow and Tarrytown before crossing the Tappan Zee Bridge. They would then follow the state Thruway to Interstate 287 in New Jersey, then south to Interstate 80 on their way to Nevada.

The village of Ossining is considering a plan to narrow part of Route 9 from four to two lanes, about a one-mile stretch of the heavily traveled road between Cedar Place and Cedar Lane. The move is meant to increase safety, but some residents have expressed concerns that it will bottleneck traffic and slow emergency vehicles.

Spent fuel rods are cooled in water-filled storage basins for a minimum of three to five years before they are moved anywhere, to reduce their level of radioactivity. Rods produced after 2010 would, under the DOE plan, be packed into heavy-duty rail casks and placed on heavy-haul trucks that have engines at each end, like a freight train, and are 220 feet long.

The casks to be carried by those trucks hold up to 160 tons of nuclear waste.

The highway routes were determined by the DOE's Transportation Geographic Information System, or TRAGIS, which is supposed to take into account such factors as the condition of local roads and population densities. The system tries to route nuclear shipments over interstate highways as much as possible.

Bob Halstead, transportation adviser for the Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects, said the current route through Westchester replaces a version that was in place through January.

"Originally, the trucks were to go up Route 9 to 202 in Peekskill and cross the Bear Mountain Bridge to Harriman," he said. "It was crazy."

Since Indian Point does not have an interstate highway nearby, Halstead said, the Energy Department has always expected to transport most of the spent fuel through local communities.

The route past the Sleepy Hollow cemetery on Route 9 is now on the preferred travel map.

"I have driven that route when it was filled with tourists," Halstead said, "and that is a crazy route to put these trucks on."

Faith Bremner of Gannett News Service contributed to this report.

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