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Con Ed contradicted; NRC saw no danger from 2000 accident

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Hundreds of gallons of radioactive water from Indian Point 2 leaked into the Hudson River and the Buchanan water system days after a Feb. 15, 2000, accident at the nuclear power plant, contrary to assertions by Consolidated Edison that all the contaminated liquid was contained, according to documents from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Nearly 20,000 gallons of water that circulated in the nuclear reactor's core poured out of a burst tube in one of the plant's huge aging steam generators and flowed into a second, nonradioactive water system used to power the plant's 200-ton electric generating turbine. The spill triggered a radiation alert throughout the region and was the worst accident in the plant's history.

Officials from Con Edison, which owned the plant at the time, said after the accident that some radioactive steam had been released into the atmosphere - at no harm to the public - but that the coolant itself was contained in the turbine's pressurized water system. Until now, no one from Con Edison, the NRC or Entergy has disputed that assertion. NRC documents show that coolant also spilled from the second system at least twice and flowed out of the plant through storm drains.

"Statements we have made in the past were accurate, and that's all we are saying," Con Edison spokesman Chris Olert said yesterday.

In fact, Con Edison spokesmen have publicly insisted none of the contaminated liquid entered the environment.

"We were always told at public hearings that it was not technically a leak because it was all contained, and there was no environmental exposure," said Marilyn Elie of the Citizens Awareness Network. "That's what we were always told, and we had no way to verify that. The utility lied. There are no two ways about it, and the NRC did nothing to uncover the lie."

NRC spokesman Neil Sheehan said, "We made the documents public as soon as they

were filed."

He referred to the agency's first report, filed Aug. 28, 2000, which said "a small amount of liquid activity ... was unexpectedly released into the discharge canal" and flowed into the Hudson River.

NRC reports reviewed by The Journal News show the coolant from the nuclear reactor was contaminated with several radioactive elements, including isotopes of tritium, cesium, iodine and radioactive gases. The documents said that there was no danger to the public's health or Hudson River fish, and that the level of contamination to the public water system and the river was considered minute because the reactor coolant was heavily diluted. The plant's storm-water discharge canal runs the length of the site and carries 100,000 gallons of water per minute.

Because of the dilution, the NRC reports said that the unplanned discharge of contaminated water still fell well within the technical license requirements of Indian Point 2. It could not be learned by a review of the reports, however, how contaminated the coolant was before being dumped into the discharge canal.

One NRC report, dated Jan. 6, 2001, included annual discharge audits compiled by Con Edison and assessments from NRC inspectors who reviewed the discharge reports and noted where violations of regulatory rules or procedures might have occurred. In the report was a criticism of Con Edison for not cleaning up the contaminated storm-drain system months after the spill.

The accident led to the plant's shutdown for nearly a year and renewed criticism of the plant's safety that has intensified since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The January 2001 NRC report said that as late as October 2000, "the Unit 2 storm drain system still contained contaminated water due to the February 2000 primary to secondary leak." The report added that despite regulations requiring immediate cleanup of the contaminated drainage system, "these actions have not occurred despite over three months elapsing."

In addition, the report said that while the Buchanan water system was identified as containing contaminated water four times in 2000, "no action has been taken to restrict its use or to decontaminate it."

"While programs exist to (decontaminate it) they are not being implemented," the report said.

John Kelly, director of licensing for Entergy, which now owns Indian Point 2, said yesterday that after researching Con Edison's records he found that "in the neighborhood of hundreds of gallons of contaminated water leaked into the floor drain and went into the discharge canal leading to the river."

At the time of the accident, Kelly said, the radioactive water flowed into massive "reheaters" adjacent to the power generating turbine. All drainage systems at Indian Point that may hold radioactive material contain radiation detectors and holding centers where the liquid is decontaminated before it is released. The system even includes special lavatories used by personnel who are undergoing chemotherapy.

But the electric generating system is in a nonnuclear building, Kelly said, and its

storm drainage system does not have the built-in holding area. In the course of trying to remove the contaminated water from the building on Feb. 21 and 22, 2000, some of it spilled and went untreated down the drain.

"Con Ed reported the discharge to the NRC," Entergy's Kelly said, "and they removed the water from the drain, though there is some question as to how well it was documented. It was cleaned up before we got it."

Entergy purchased the plant Sept. 6, 2001.

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