

May 1, 2003 Thursday

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 1A

LENGTH: 1092 words

HEADLINE: Report: Plant was poorly maintained

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BODY:

New study focuses on Indian Point 2 operations in 1990s

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The Journal News

Operating conditions at Indian Point 2 deteriorated alarmingly throughout the 1990s, and only intensive intervention by the regional Nuclear Regulatory Commission office, beginning in 1995, halted the downward spiral, according to a report released yesterday by the agency's inspector general.

Yet, the report also notes that senior NRC officials refused to allow the regional administrator, Hubert Miller, to place the Buchanan plant on a special "watch list," despite the fact that there was no sign of improvement and a litany of continuing management and performance problems. They include broken and malfunctioning equipment, lax training, and a Feb. 15, 2000, steam generator tube rupture that triggered the plant's only nuclear emergency. The plant shut down for a year after the accident while the defective steam generators were replaced.

At the time, the plant was owned by Consolidated Edison, which sold the plant to Entergy Nuclear Northeast in September 2001.

Only after the rupture did the NRC place Indian Point 2 on its watch list, which meant the plant would continue to have a heightened level of oversight. The plant was given a "red" safety designation for the incident, the worst of four in the agency's color-coded safety system, and was ranked as the least safe plant in the nation for two years. The "red" designation was removed last year as a result of improvements in equipment and training by Entergy. The plant still receives the NRC's highest level of oversight.

Con Edison spokesman Joe Petta said the company has not had time to study the report and could not comment. Inspector General Hubert Bell and Miller also declined to comment.

The report, begun two years ago, found that there was no lax oversight on the part of the NRC, despite serious problems with Indian Point 2's operation. It also found that Con Edison repeatedly pledged to improve the plant's performance and developed elaborate "correction action programs," or CAPs, which it did not carry

out.

"Between 1995 and 2001," the report states, "IP2 experienced a series of operational problems, attributed in large part to deficiencies in IP2's CAP. Between April 1995 and February 2001, NRC conducted 20 special team inspections at IP2, logging 5,870 inspection hours. ... However, despite heightened levels of NRC attention to these weaknesses, problems at IP2 remained unresolved."

Some concerned with safety at Indian Point 2 yesterday challenged the report's conclusion that the NRC acted effectively.

Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., who has been pressing Bell for months to release the report, said she was concerned that the inspector general "appears to have found the NRC less than effective in bringing about necessary improvements in plant performance, including at Indian Point. We need to ensure that these nuclear power plants are held to the highest standards for safety and security. Unfortunately, despite its continued efforts, it appears that the NRC may not be holding plants to these standards, and that must be corrected."

Jim Riccio, nuclear analyst for the environmental group Greenpeace, said the regulatory system relies heavily on the ability of companies to identify and fix their own problems, while the NRC monitors their progress.

"You cannot expect a licensee to self-identify problems that have the potential to shut down their reactor," he said. "They are not going to do it, and the NRC cannot in good conscience say Indian Point 2 is safe. They just don't know."

Among the major problems facing Indian Point 2 under Con Edison's ownership that were cited in the report are:

- * Incorrect wiring of the reactor protection system. It is responsible for shutting down the reactor within seconds. Engineers at the plant had filed 13 internal "corrective reports" between 1998 and 2000 noting the improper wiring. Bell's report found Con Edison had "appropriate plans in place" to correct the wiring but did not carry them out.

The NRC, however, acted properly in monitoring Con Edison's actions and testing the protection system to make sure it would work properly even though it was not correctly wired, the report says. The agency's position did not change, even though a malfunction in the system in 1999 led to a shutdown.

- * Most of the plant's major operating systems did not conform with license diagrams and specifications. Con Edison sent sworn letters to the NRC in 1997 and 1999 that it would bring all systems into compliance within two years. This was not done. The inspector general found that the NRC did nothing wrong by allowing Con Edison to push back its own deadlines. Entergy launched a \$20 million project shortly after taking over the plant to bring all systems into compliance. That is scheduled for completion by the end of this year.

- * Con Edison did not correct problems identified since 1995 and showed a persistent inability to identify the causes of mechanical and electrical breakdowns. This resulted in a backlog of thousands of broken or improperly functioning items.

Bell found that this inability to solve problems led Miller to push for additional oversight of the plant. Miller operated properly, the report concludes, though the heightened scrutiny failed to improve the plant's safety margins.

* Miller tried since 1997 to have Indian Point 2 placed on the NRC's "watch list" but was overruled at management meetings because he "did not identify a situation where the plant was unsafe, a safety system was inoperable or adverse trends were apparent."

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Plants returning to full power level

The two nuclear plants at Indian Point are expected to return to full power production today after being shut down in separate incidents this week. Indian Point 2's shutdown Monday afternoon was triggered by a Consolidated Edison power outage in the Buchanan area. Jim Steets, spokesman for Entergy Nuclear Northeast, which owns the plants, said the plant resumed operations about 2 p.m. yesterday. Indian Point 3 shut down about 3 a.m. Tuesday when a fire broke out in the insulation around the high-pressure blades in the electric generating turbine. The fire was in the non-nuclear section of the plant, but area officials and the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission were notified. Steets said Indian Point 3 resumed operating about 7:30 a.m. yesterday. The plants are powered up in stages.