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Indian Pt. Broken Pipe Spurs Safety Worries

By ANNIE CORREAL

TWO weeks ago, a worker at the Indian Point nuclear power plant in Buchanan noticed some water on the floor of a building in Unit 2. It was spewing from a broken pipe in the secondary cooling system, which circulates water that contains radioactive tritium.

The broken pipe was found Feb. 16, isolated by the middle of that week and dug up and replaced last Saturday. But in the meantime, about 100,000 gallons of water, or 10 percent of the water in the secondary cooling system storage tank, had escaped.

[Nuclear Regulatory Commission](#) officials said there were very low levels of tritium in the water.

“There is no threat to health and safety,” said Diane Screnci, a spokeswoman for the commission. “There are levels of tritium that are allowed to be released, and this would be well below those limits.”

The water contained about 2,000 picocuries per liter of the radioactive isotope tritium, one-tenth the permissible level for drinking water. (Radioactivity is commonly measured in picocuries.) Tritium occurs naturally in the earth’s atmosphere but is also a byproduct of a nuclear reaction and can be harmful if ingested.

To critics, the amount of tritium leaked was not the issue; a broken pipe was a reminder of the aging infrastructure at the plant, which was built in the early 1970s.

“It’s further evidence that Indian Point is an old plant with a chronic history of problems, accidents and unplanned emergency shutdowns,” said Alex Matthiessen, president of [Riverkeeper](#), a Hudson River watchdog group that is fighting Indian Point’s attempt to renew its license. The state attorney general’s office and the State Department of Environmental Conservation are also contesting the renewal.

A renewal would allow Indian Point's plants, Units 2 and 3, to remain in operation for another 20 years. They supply about 30 percent of the electricity for New York City and Westchester.

James F. Steets, a spokesman for Entergy Nuclear, which owns and runs the plant, said the pipe that broke was probably part of the plant's original piping and was made of carbon steel covered with a protective coating. He said external corrosion caused the rupture.

"It's eight feet underground, so there's no way of knowing when you have to replace it," he said. The N.R.C. did not order an inspection of the pipes after the incident, but Mr. Steets said Entergy would check on those in similar situations.

A nuclear plant's license is granted by the N.R.C. based on its performance in two areas: programs and processes to manage the effects of aging, and the impact of a plant on the environment. The broken pipe would be considered part of the daily operation, Ms. Screni said; it does not play a role in license renewal.

Deborah Brancato, a lawyer for Riverkeeper, said this leak might figure into Riverkeeper's contention that there are safety issues related to the plant's aging and ability to withstand aging over the licensing term. She said the leak "calls into question whether Indian Point's aging-management program is capable of preventing or even detecting such problems."

John Milgram, a spokesman for the attorney general's office, called aging infrastructure "a key factor" in the office's opposition to relicensing Indian Point. "This new leak is just further evidence of the validity of that position," he said.

The largest tritium leak at the plant was discovered in 2005 when moist earth was found to contain high levels of tritium and strontium 90, which is also radioactive. Most contamination was traced to a crack in the spent-fuel pool of Unit 1, which was closed in 1974, but there was also leakage from spent-fuel pools of unit 2.

Mr. Steets said that the recent incident was the first time there had been a leak into groundwater involving tritium since 2005. Ms. Screni confirmed that but said that the leak discovered in 2005 was "ongoing for a long time."