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Nuclear Reactor's Life Is Prolonged in New Jersey

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WASHINGTON — The federal [Nuclear Regulatory Commission](#) voted Wednesday to allow the [Oyster Creek nuclear reactor](#) in South Jersey to operate for another 20 years, rejecting claims made by opponents about risk.

The Oyster Creek case had generated intense interest because the plant, in Lacey Township in Ocean County, is the nation's oldest nuclear reactor, having opened in 1969, and rust had corroded its steel liner. The liner would contain radioactive steam in an emergency and supports hundreds of tons of water in a pool above the reactor during routine refueling.

But after extensive repeated examinations by the plant's operator, now called the Amergen Energy Company, engineers at the regulatory commission concluded that the rust was not progressing and that enough metal remained for safe operation.

Since 2000, the commission has allowed extensions of initial 40-year licenses for 51 other reactors in the country. By authorizing its staff to extend the Oyster Creek license, it sent a signal that opponents of renewals at other plants — including Indian Point 2 and 3 in Buchanan, N.Y., and Vermont Yankee in Vernon, Vt. — may find it hard to prevail.

Three of the commission's four members voted to uphold a ruling by a lower regulatory panel to license the plant and deny an appeal by opponents who wanted the case reopened for discussion. The fourth dissented from part of the majority opinion but said he agreed with much of it.

Some commission officials have even discussed the possibility of a second round of extensions that would allow reactors to operate for up to 80 years. The commission's position is that the initial licenses were limited to 40 years to address antitrust concerns and future economic considerations — not because of the reactors' physical limits.

The prospect of higher prices for competing fuels like oil and natural gas has also been good news for old nuclear reactors lately. Proposals to impose new costs on [coal](#)-fired plants for the carbon dioxide they emit, a factor in [global warming](#), have also heartened nuclear

4/2/2009

Nuclear Reactor's Life Is Prolonged in ...

operators.

Opponents of the Oyster Creek extension had been hopeful that [President Obama](#) would appoint new members to the commission who were less friendly to the industry before the decision. (There is one vacancy now, and another may open this summer.)

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