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Wrong Answer at Indian Point

Ever since New York State ruled in the spring that the obsolete cooling system at the Indian Point nuclear power plant in Buchanan, N.Y., pollutes the Hudson River and kills too many fish, the plant's owner, the Entergy Corporation, has been seeking public support for what it calls a "smarter solution" to the problem.

Finding some solution is important for Entergy, which wants to keep operating Indian Point's two nuclear reactors, whose federal licenses expire in 2013 and 2015. To renew the licenses for another 20 years, Entergy needs a water-quality certificate from the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

The agency denied the certificate in April. Indian Point's cooling system sucks up about 2.5 billion gallons of river water a day — by far the largest single industrial use of water in New York State, according to the agency. The water passes through the plant and is dumped back in the river, hotter than before. About a billion fish, larvae and eggs are killed each year, trapped against the cooling system's intake screens or drawn through its pipes, or fatally stressed by the heated water, which holds less oxygen.

As it has since the 1970s, the government has pointed Indian Point toward a simple, sure way to solve the problem: cooling towers that recycle water in a closed loop and thus require very little from the river. Environmental law requires power plants to use the "best technology available" to minimize the damage they do, and closed-cycle cooling is widely recognized to be as good as it gets.

Entergy officials say otherwise. They have appealed the denial, arguing, among other things, that the cooling towers would take too long to build and would be monstrosities the size of Yankee Stadium. The company also says the new towers would belch dangerous "particulate matter" into the air. Entergy is, therefore, offering another technology: "wedge-wire" screens submerged in the river that they say would protect fish at lower cost.

In rebuttal, the state argues that closed-cycle towers could easily be smaller and that the "particulate matter" is harmless water vapor and salt. It also says Entergy's claim that fish and

larvae will swim away from or be swept safely around the screens is unproven and that, in any case, the screens will do nothing to solve the problem of returning heated water to the river.

The state also points out that if Indian Point's owner had been serious about protecting the environment and obeying the law, it would have started on the cooling towers 30 years ago. Instead the company gambled on denial and delay. Entergy is an important energy source for the region. But Albany must make sure that the company addresses, not ducks, the problem.