



8. NUCLEAR CRISIS: N.Y. governor orders safety review at Indian Point

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Hannah Northey, E&E reporter

The New York governor announced a safety review yesterday of the Indian Point nuclear power station, a decision that follows a federal judge's recent dismissal of challenges to a fire protection exemption at the 40-year-old Hudson River plant.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) said the 2,010-megawatt Indian Point plant is the most vulnerable nuclear plant to an earthquake since its Unit 3 reactor is on a fault line about 30 miles north of New York City.

"Frankly, that was surprising to me, one normally doesn't think of earthquakes and New York in the same breath, especially compared to California and out West," Cuomo said at a press briefing in Albany. "I've had concerns about Indian Point for a long time."

Concerns about nuclear safety have surged worldwide as Japan struggles to cool damaged reactors and spent fuel rods at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, which was crippled by a massive earthquake and tsunami last week.

Cuomo said that as state attorney general of New York he urged the closing of Indian Point. "This plant in this proximity to New York City was never a good risk," he said.

Entergy Corp. spokesman Jim Steets said Indian Point can withstand the strongest earthquake that can be expected for that site, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has said nuclear plants are safe and every reactor is designed with a margin of safety beyond the strongest earthquake in that area. Specifically, Steets said the Indian Point nuclear plant could withstand a magnitude 6 earthquake.

"It's conservatism that's built into the industry," he said.

Steets acknowledged that Unit 3 of Indian Point, which began operating in 1976, sits along an inactive fault line. But even after researchers at the Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory released a 2008 study on fault lines in the region and called more attention to Indian Point, NRC determined the threat "didn't place us outside the bounds of our current protection," Steets said.

New York's review follows a March 4 decision by Judge Loretta Preska of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York that dismissed a lawsuit from environmentalists challenging NRC's decision to exempt Indian Point from certain fire protection rules.

At issue in the lawsuit: NRC's 2007 decision exempting Entergy from a rule requiring that cables, equipment and nonsafety circuits be enclosed in a barrier capable of resisting fire for at least one hour.

Entergy can now continue using material to protect cables with material found to withstand fire for up to 48 minutes as opposed to one hour, which is normally required, Steets said.

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