

Fire erupts at nuclear power plant outside of New York City

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12 May 2015

A transformer explosion rocked the Indian Point nuclear power plant in Buchanan, New York Saturday, shutting down one of two generating units at the aging power station. Plumes of black smoke billowed in the air just 200 yards from the station's nuclear reactor. Fire crews and an automatic sprinkler system were able to extinguish the blaze, which did not result in any radiation leak.

The plant's owner, Entergy, reported no injuries. However, a hazardous mixture of fire suppressant and transformer oil, perhaps several thousand gallons according to a Nuclear Regulatory Commission spokesman, spilled into the Hudson River Saturday. The fluid overflowed a containment moat, draining via the plant's stormwater system into the river. Emergency crews have since put in place oil booms surrounding the outflow. It is unknown how much of the oil flowed downriver before the booms could be installed.

The cause of Saturday's explosion is still under investigation by the company and government regulators. However, transformer fires have become somewhat regular occurrences at Indian Point. In 2007 and 2010, failed ceramic insulators on the top of the transformers sparked explosions. The latter incident resulted in a spill of 20,000 gallons of transformer oil, half of which escaped the containment system and ended up unrecovered in the Hudson River.

In 2012 New York state, under governor Andrew Cuomo, fined Entergy \$1.2 million for the 2010 fire and oil spill. At the time, the state criticized Indian Point's aging infrastructure and spill containment system as inadequate, citing "longstanding structural conditions." The paltry fine, which amounted to a slap on the wrist for the \$43 billion corporation, had no meaningful impact in correcting the structural

deficiencies and preventing another fire.

Governor Cuomo, who was on the scene Sunday, downplayed the emergency while posturing as an opponent of nuclear generation so close to the nation's largest city. He made clear that what happened was a "relatively minor occurrence," then remarked that "if something goes wrong here, it can go very wrong for a lot of people. So it's always been a priority for us."

The 2,000 megawatt plant supplies up to a quarter of New York City's electricity. It is located just 24 miles north of the city limits, in the most densely populated region of the country. Approximately 18 million people live within 50 miles of the plant.

Japan's 2011 Fukushima Daiichi disaster focused attention on the potentially catastrophic results of nuclear energy, in particular in close proximity to a major population center where large-scale evacuations would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. "Many scholars have already argued that any evacuation plans shouldn't be called plans, but rather 'fantasy documents,'" Daniel Aldrich, a political science professor at Purdue University, remarked to the *New York Times* in the wake of Fukushima.

Indian Point's two currently operating units, constructed in 1973 and 1975, have accumulated a litany of safety and reliability breaches. Over the past several years maintenance issues triggered a large number of unplanned shutdowns. Paul Gallay, the president of the clean water advocacy group Riverkeeper, summed up to the environmental news service E&E, "Indian Point has a long, disturbing history of operational and environmental problems. The plant's aging infrastructure has caught up to it, and we must see that it is closed or these problems will only worsen with potentially catastrophic results."

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In order to continue operating with out-of-date technology, the plant relies on waivers from the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission. According to New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, Indian Point has applied for more than 100 exemptions from rules governing fire protection. Among these include a shortage of fire detectors and fire suppression equipment, and fire insulation that can withstand just 24 minutes rather than the three hours required of other plants.

To make matters worse, recent US Geological Survey estimates have called into question Indian Point's ability to withstand earthquakes. Indian Point was among 10 nuclear power plants prioritized last year to undergo a reevaluation of earthquake vulnerability. The plant, with two reactors and 1,500 tons of radioactive waste on site, sits atop two earthquake fault lines. Entergy has resisted conducting the assessment, which it estimates will cost \$10 million.

Entergy is currently seeking to extend by 20 years its operating licenses for its two units, one of which expired in 2013 and the other this year. The Obama administration has not made a final determination, but has allowed the plant to continue operating on administrative extensions.



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