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HEADLINE: Plan: Ship nuclear waste on Hudson

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BODY:

Federal proposal for Indian Point met by criticism

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Highly radioactive nuclear waste would be shipped over several years from the nuclear plants in Buchanan down the Hudson River through the Port of New York en route to Nevada, as part of the U.S. Department of Energy's national waste-storage plan.

The shipments are detailed in a proposal to be considered in the spring when Congress votes on President Bush's plan to open a national repository for nuclear waste under Nevada's Yucca Mountain in 2010. The Energy Department's environmental impact report states that thousands of shipments of radioactive fuel would go through 15 commercial ports during a 38-year period.

Included in the plan is spent fuel being stored at the defunct Indian Point 1 and the 1,000-megawatt reactors at Indian Point 2 and 3. The three Indian Point spent fuel pools hold more than 1,200 tons of radioactive material.

The plan calls for loading the Indian Point fuel on 58 barges and floating it down the Hudson River to the container shipping center at Port Elizabeth in New Jersey, opposite the Statue of Liberty.

But the proposal raised immediate concerns from environmentalists and elected officials.

"I am very troubled by this," said Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y. "Any plan that involves the shipping of nuclear waste on a barge down the river past New York City raises enormous health, environmental and security concerns."

"We should not be using our ports, which are in the most densely populated parts of the state, as rest stops for nuclear material," said Debra DeShong, spokeswoman for Sen. Robert Torricelli, D-N.J.

New York City Councilman Jim Gennaro, D-Queens, said, "There is no way to keep the people of the city of New York and the metropolitan region safe from accidents or intentional mischief that comes with the shipment of nuclear fuel."

Alex Matthiessen, director of the Garrison-based environmental group Riverkeeper, said, "We would definitely try to block it in court. It seems like such a pie-in-the-sky idea."

"Moving spent fuel off-site from Indian Point is a foolish idea given the terrorist threat we face."

The river shipments are needed to handle the waste from 17 plants that are located far from railroad lines. The ports are located on both coasts, Lake Michigan and on three major rivers.

When waste shipments reach the ports, they would be placed on rail cars and sent to Nevada. The proposal for Indian Point and the other plants without rail access would bring 21,572 tons of nuclear waste - or 19 percent of all the commercial power plant waste destined for Yucca Mountain - into commercial ports.

Jim Steets, spokesman for Entergy Nuclear, which owns Indian Point, said there already are docking facilities at Indian Point 2, though it may have to be expanded and strengthened to handle any spent fuel shipments.

He said it was premature, however, to discuss possible future shipments.

In all, there are more than 77,000 tons of nuclear waste in the storage pools of the nation's 103 nuclear reactors. The Energy Department has considered trucking the spent fuel to Yucca Mountain, but its preferred method is using rail cars because they carry six times more waste than trucks and are thought to be safer.

Over 38 years, it would take 105,685 trucks to move the waste from 72 power plant sites to Yucca Mountain. In comparison, it would take 18,243 rail cars, supplemented by 3,122 trucks, to move the waste to Nevada. Supporters say the lead-lined, stainless steel shipping containers, called casks, are strong enough to withstand severe accidents and terrorist attacks.

The casks are designed to withstand, among other things, a 30-foot fall onto a hard surface and 30 minutes' exposure to fire at 1,475 degrees. Since 1964, the industry has had more than 3,000 shipments of used nuclear fuel without a major accident.

Environmental groups have long contended that the waste should not be moved at all.

"What if there is an accident on the barge? What happens to Hudson River traffic then?" asked Marilyn Elie of the Citizens Awareness Network. "I have no confidence in moving nuclear waste. We used it here. We should be responsible for it."

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