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Natural Gas Pipeline Poses Nuclear Safety, Security Threat

New York Officials and National Groups Join Safety Experts

Call for Halt to Pipeline Construction Next to Indian Point Nuclear Plant

Washington, DC – National environmental groups want to put the brakes on construction of a massive natural gas pipeline, citing nuclear safety and terrorism risks. They say recently revealed documents show the proposed pipeline was approved earlier this year without an adequate technical review. The pipeline is to be built directly adjacent to the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant in Westchester County, just 25 miles north of New York City.

The organizations Nuclear Information and Resource Service (NIRS), Greenpeace, Riverkeeper, and Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) all issued letters to agencies reviewing the pipeline project – the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) – calling for an independent safety analysis before construction of the pipeline can begin in the area near the nuclear reactors. The groups’ concerns provide national heft to local opposition, and backs a growing chorus of local, county and state officials,¹ residents and groups who believe construction of the pipeline must be halted. A pipeline explosion could cause a total loss of power to Indian Point, disable the reactors’ safety systems, and trigger a nuclear accident, as happened at Japan’s Fukushima Dai-Ichi nuclear plant in 2011.

“This is the largest natural gas pipeline to be located next to a nuclear power plant anywhere in the country, and it poses a clear and compelling nuclear safety risk,” said Tim Judson, Executive Director of the Nuclear Information and Resource Service. “Previous gas pipeline accidents have had devastating effects on the local community. But locating the AIM pipeline next to Indian Point poses not only new and unprecedented danger to area residents, but to the entire NYC metro region, and it has major ramifications for the rest of the country,” Judson continued. “Whether you are for or against Indian Point, the risk is unacceptable. There is literally no excuse for allowing construction of the pipeline while such serious nuclear safety questions remain,” said Judson.

¹ Elected officials calling for a halt to construction and an independent safety review include Senator Charles Schumer; Senator Kirsten Gillibrand; Congresswoman Nita Lowey; New York Senators Andrea Stewart-Cousins, Liz Krueger and George Latimer; New York State Assemblymembers Sandra Galef, David Buchwald, Shelley Mayer, Steve Otis and Amy Paulin; County Legislators Catherine Borgia, Ben Boykin, Alan Cole, Ken Jenkins, Chairman Michael Kaplowitz, Catherine Parker, Mary Jane Shimsky, Alfreda Williams and Lyndon Williams; Town of Cortlandt Supervisor Linda Puglisi, Mayor of Buchanan Theresa Knickerbocker, Mayor of Peekskill Frank Catalina and many other local officials.

About 20 million people live and work within 50 miles of Indian Point, the highest density of population surrounding a nuclear plant anywhere in the world. A 2003 study of the consequences of a reactor meltdown at Indian Point found the impact could be staggering: up to 44,000 fatalities from radiation sickness; over 500,000 long-term cancer deaths; up to 11 million people permanently evacuated; and over \$2 trillion in economic losses. The plant's location has made it known as a potential military or terrorist target for over a decade. In addition to the possibility of an accidental pipeline explosion affecting the plant, the groups say the pipeline increases the likelihood of a successful attack on Indian Point.

“Deliberately placing the equivalent of thousands of tons of TNT directly adjacent to Indian Point poses a unique national security threat,” said Judson. “No one can even bring a barbecue propane tank on site without special protection and permission. This nuclear plant is a known terrorist target, and the AIM pipeline would greatly enhance potential attackers’ ability to cause a nuclear accident at Indian Point,” Judson continued. “The AIM pipeline project must not be permitted to move forward unless and until a comprehensive, independent safety review proves it is safe, and compliance with NRC regulations is assured.”

FERC issued a “no significant impact” ruling in March, relying on NRC to assess the nuclear safety risk of a pipeline explosion. However, NRC documents reviewed in July by nuclear safety expert Paul Blanch and world renowned pipeline expert Richard Kuperwicz show the agency did not conduct a proper scientific analysis. Its recommendation to FERC was based on hand-drawn sketches and inaccurate information from Spectra Energy, the pipeline developer, and Entergy, the plant’s owner and operator. The documents were not signed, not dated and not approved by anyone within the NRC, and did not comply with the commission’s regulations. Blanch and Kuperwicz revealed alarming new information about the faulty review process at an official NRC Petition Review Board presentation NRC in mid-July. These concerns have not been addressed by the NRC, yet, on September 1, FERC issued an order approving Spectra to begin construction on a portion of the pipeline near Indian Point.

“The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has previously rejected the placement of much smaller gas pipelines that were much farther away from reactors than the AIM pipeline would be from Indian Point,” said Judson. “Yet, from the recently released NRC documents, it appears that the commission failed to conduct even a standard safety review, and all but rubber-stamped the AIM pipeline. The risk inherent in locating the AIM pipeline next to Indian Point warrants an abundance of caution and greater regulatory scrutiny, not less,” Judson said.

As a nuclear safety regulator, NRC lacks the expertise to evaluate the hazards of natural gas explosions. Nevertheless, in previous cases, the agency has determined that much smaller gas lines were an unacceptable risk, even when located much farther from a nuclear plant than the AIM pipeline. Despite the obvious risks involving such a large pipeline, the agency did not engage a gas pipeline expert to conduct a transient risk analysis and did not look at historical data from other pipeline accidents such as San Bruno, CA; Sissonville, WV; or Edison, NJ.

NRC has a special committee that can undertake reviews of new or unusual safety issues, like those posed by the AIM pipeline. The Union of Concerned Scientists wrote to the NRC asking that the commission task its Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards (ACRS) to review the

impact of natural gas pipelines on nuclear safety, based on the AIM pipeline case. ACRS is an independent body of experts that assesses nuclear safety issues and makes recommendations to the NRC Commission. In its letter, UCS points out that NRC's lack of transparency and the inconsistency in the commission's evaluation of the AIM pipeline require independent review by the advisory committee:

Many questions about the natural gas pipelines near Indian Point have been asked and answered. ... It is not apparent to UCS that all the right questions have been asked and answered. ... The ACRS could perform an ... invaluable function now by reviewing the process and criteria used by the NRC to assess potential hazards from natural gas pipelines near nuclear power plants in general and the specific cases involving Indian Point and Turkey Point. The ACRS's review would also constitute an extension to or subset of the agency's post-Fukushima work to ensure that the risks from external hazards are being appropriately managed.

BACKGROUND

The AIM pipeline involves construction of a new 42-inch natural gas pipeline, about ten times the capacity of a pipeline in San Bruno, California that exploded in 2010. The San Bruno explosion had a blast radius of over 1,000 feet, and took over 90 minutes to stop the gas flow and more than 12 hours to extinguish the fire from the blast. Critical structures at Indian Point are less than 115 feet from the AIM pipeline route, including:

- Diesel fuel storage tanks for the plant's backup power generators (also flammable).
- The electric switchyard which provides power to operate Indian Point.

Spectra would operate the pipeline remotely from Houston, Texas, over 1,000 miles away, but claims it could identify a pipeline rupture, close the appropriate valves, and get it under control in just three minutes. The NTSB investigations of gas line ruptures reports typical isolation ranging from 1 to 4 hours. There are no accident reports that support line isolation in less 1 hour.