

Clearing the Air with Nuclear Energy



By: Alan J. Steinberg

During my tenure as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Regional Administrator for New York and New Jersey, the threats of terrorism changed the public discourse about nuclear energy. Today, with the concerns raised by the incidents at Fukushima, I see many parallels. Some of it is rational; more is simply fear-ridden and exploitative.

Most troubling is how quickly anti-nuclear organizations began to capitalize on the Japanese nuclear incident as an opportunity to call for the closure of Indian Point and other nuclear facilities, before key facts were analyzed.

These special interests helped generate a flurry of sensational headlines, doomsday predictions, and fear mongering that engulfed the media. Individuals with no expertise on nuclear energy were providing television and radio interviews, helping to propagate misinformation and rumors.

There will be many lessons learned from Fukushima, and the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is currently engaged in a comprehensive review of the 104 U.S. nuclear power plants. As a result, the U.S. nuclear power industry—which already has an excellent safety record—will no doubt evolve and become even safer.

And while Indian Point may be the focus of the most sensational claims, we cannot forget that New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut have a total of a dozen nuclear plants, so nuclear safety cannot be taken for granted.

President Obama and Secretary Chu have both taken a strong and statesmanlike stance to reiterate the safety of U.S. nuclear power plants and voice support for the expansion of nuclear energy to proceed. Secretary Chu has specifically said Indian Point is safe. So has Gregory Jaczko, the head of the NRC.

Without Indian Point's 2,000 megawatts of clean, safe power, we would be forced to burn more fossil fuels. This means higher levels of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, mercury, and particulate pollution. As many counties in New York are already in violation of federal air quality standards, this would take the state in the wrong direction.

Nuclear power is a safe and clean energy source. In terms of pollutants, air toxins, and greenhouse gases, nuclear is a true form of reliable "green" energy. Indian Point not only provides critical electricity for the densely populated downstate region, but avoids the release of significant amounts of toxins and particulates proven to harm the environment and public health.

Alan J. Steinberg served as Regional Administrator of Region 2 EPA during the administration of former President George W. Bush. Region 2 EPA consists of the states of New York and New Jersey, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and eight federally recognized Indian nations. He currently serves on the Political Science faculty of Monmouth University.

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