

NY nuclear plant finds support at public hearing

By JIM FITZGERALD

CORTLANDT MANOR, N.Y. -- The New York metro area will have dirtier air, higher energy prices and thousands more unemployed workers if the state insists on cooling towers for the Indian Point nuclear power plant, speakers said Tuesday.

Testimony at a public hearing a few miles from the plant was overwhelmingly critical of a state ruling that said Indian Point has been devastating the Hudson River ecosystem through its use of up to 2.5 billion gallons of river water per day to make steam and cool its reactors.

Screens keep out most full-grown fish. But baby fish, fish eggs and other small life forms are sucked in and killed. Some of the fish that hit the screens also die or are injured.

"I feel sorry for the fish, I really do," said Jerry Gershner, a real estate agent from Ossining who predicted higher taxes and other living costs. "But the person that I most feel sorry for is me, my family and my neighbors."

The ruling by the Department of Environmental Conservation denied Indian Point a permit it needs to renew its federal licenses and continue operating into the 2030s. Without new licenses, both of Indian Point's operating reactors would be shut down by 2015.

Thirty of the first 36 speakers supported Entergy's appeal of the DEC ruling. Entergy says its plan to protect fish using a new type of screen filter is a better solution than the cooling towers.

Speakers representing carpenters, boilermakers and electrical workers unions spoke against the ruling, as did spokesmen for various business groups. Both worried about high energy costs scaring off businesses.

"This is the one issue where the business community and the unions are in absolute agreement," said Al Samuels, president of the Rockland Business Association.

Many speakers seemed to assume that Indian Point would close if the DEC does not relent, although Entergy makes hundreds of millions a year in profits there and has not threatened to leave.

Representatives of the school district that Entergy's taxes support, and a cultural organization that receives donations, testified glowingly to Administrative Law Judge Maria Villa about the company's good works.

Peter Pockriss, spokesman for Historic Hudson Valley, which runs tourist sites in the area, said Entergy sets "the gold standard for corporate philanthropy." He did not address the cooling controversy.

Experts in the field have suggested that a compromise is possible, and Assemblywoman Sandra Galef, who represents the area, suggested one on Tuesday.

Galef, a Democrat, said that rather than imposing cooling towers, the DEC could authorize a test of the new screens Entergy proposes using.

"See whether the quality of the Hudson is not compromised," she suggested. "If it doesn't work ... by the time that happens, there might be something else out there."

"Let's try the simple solution first."

On Wednesday, the DEC will meet with several environmental groups that want to have a say at the hearing on the appeal. Then the hearing will be scheduled and the judge will make a recommendation to the DEC commissioner. There's no deadline for a decision.