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Transformer Burns at Indian Point; Cuomo Cites Potential Environmental Risks

By LIAM STACK MAY 9, 2015

A transformer fire at the Indian Point nuclear power plant in Buchanan, N.Y. sent plumes of black smoke into the air on Saturday and raised concerns that the foam used to extinguish the flames could pose an environmental hazard.

The fire at the plant, located 24 miles from New York City, began around 6 p.m. and was doused by the plant's sprinkler system. It did not amount to a "nuclear emergency," said Jerry Nappi, a spokesman for Entergy, the company that operates Indian Point. No one was injured, he added.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo called the fire "a relatively minor situation," but said the transformer had been "badly damaged" by the flames.

Firefighters "saturated" the damaged transformer "with a special kind of foam," said Mr. Cuomo, who voiced environmental concerns about the foam as well as oil released from the transformer during the fire.

"There is a lot of foam and a lot of oil and now we are worried about that leaking in to the Hudson River," he said. Foam or oil could enter the river through storm drains, he said.

Mr. Cuomo said the Environmental Protection Agency would be monitoring the situation at the plant: “We are doing everything we can on that front.”

In a series of messages posted to social media, officials from the plant and its parent company said that the facility’s emergency systems responded to the fire “as designed.”

One of the plant’s two remaining nuclear reactors, Unit 3, automatically shut down because of the fire. Mr. Nappi said the unit would remain offline until the cause of the fire could be determined and the transformer could be replaced.

The plant’s second reactor, Unit 2, will continue to operate. Unit 1 was shut down in 1974.

The facility, located in Westchester County, generates over 2,000 megawatts of electricity for the New York City area. Its reactors are contained within reinforced concrete and steel walls that are between 3.5 and 4.5 feet thick.

Gustavus Gricius, 34, was driving south down the opposite bank of the Hudson River when he saw “a huge ball of black smoke” rising from the power plant across the water. He pulled over to take a picture and said the sounds and smells of the scene soon made him nervous.

“We could hear the paging system from the facility across the river, ‘This is not a drill, please be aware, this is not a drill,’ ” Mr. Gricius said. “There was an electrical, oily burning smell. Once we smelled that that’s when we were like, ‘Let’s get out of here.’ ”

Mr. Gricius said that he could hear “fire trucks and emergency vehicles coming from every direction.”

Firefighters from the Verplanck, N.Y., fire department responded. Mr.

Cuomo said that he had spoken to the emergency responders and that they planned to stay on the scene throughout the night.

Patrick McGeehan and Jesse McKinley contributed reporting.

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