

NUCLEAR NEW YORK

Reliable Carbon-Free Energy

Yes, Renewable Energy Can Replace Indian Point - But Not for a Decade

By Leonard Rodberg, PhD

Three years ago, when Governor Andrew M. Cuomo announced that the Indian Point nuclear plant in Westchester County would be closing, he assured New Yorkers that carbon-free electric power, mainly wind and solar, would be in place, so there would be no need for the burning of gas and oil with their noxious, climate-destroying emissions. Now the first of Indian Point's two units is to shut down at the end of this month, and clean replacement power is nowhere in sight.

New York's new climate law, passed last summer, sets the ambitious goal of achieving completely carbon-free electricity by 2040. Today, just 30% of our downstate electricity is carbon-free -- 25% from Indian Point, 5% from upstate water and solar power. The remaining 70% is generated by burning fossil fuels, mostly oil and natural gas. When Indian Point shuts down on April 30, it will be replaced by the burning of gas and oil, which will then be generating fully 95% of our electricity.

Yes, the State does intend to build more wind and solar power so that, by the end of this decade, wind and solar maybe able to supply electricity equivalent to what is now provided by Indian Point. However, for most of the next ten years, the gas- and oil-burning plants which will take over from Indian Point will emit as much as fifteen million tons of greenhouse gases – carbon dioxide and methane -- each year. Air pollution, which is now known to increase the severity of Covid-19 illness, will increase in communities where these gas and oil plants are located -- in Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. And this shift from nuclear power to gas and oil will take place in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, when secure access to electric power is essential for all our medical facilities. It may well be a bumpy ride.

The state will, over the next decade, spend tens of billions of dollars building wind and solar facilities, and the electrical storage and transmission lines they will require, so that these renewable sources can replace some or all of the additional gas and oil to be burned when Indian Point closes. What will be the situation at that point, in 2030? We will be exactly where we are today, in 2020, with just 30% of our downstate needs met by carbon-free sources. We will have made no progress at all towards eliminating the burning of fossil fuels, large amounts of greenhouse gases will have been launched into the atmosphere, and additional toxic pollution will have been imposed on residents of our metropolitan area.

This is the tragedy of the Governor's misguided plan to shut down the largest source of clean energy in the State – the Indian Point nuclear plant.