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REPS. MARKEY, JOHN HALL AND ADLER REQUEST INVESTIGATION INTO LEAKY PIPES AT NUCLEAR PLANTS

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Representative Edward Markey (D-Mass.), Chairman of the Energy and Environment Subcommittee, Rep. John Hall (D-N.Y.), and Rep. John Adler (D-N.J.) sent a letter yesterday to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) requesting an investigation into the integrity, safety, inspection, maintenance, regulations and enforcement issues surrounding buried piping at our nation's nuclear power plants. These pipes serve critical functions within power plants. In some cases, these buried pipes carry the water which would cool the reactor core in the event of an unexpected plant shut-down. In other cases, the pipes carry diesel fuel to emergency generators. Despite the critical importance of these pipes, most have never been inspected. After decades underground, neither the NRC nor the plant operators can be absolutely certain that the pipes are intact.

The letter to the GAO was prompted by a rash of recent failures in the buried piping systems of nuclear reactors. For example, just one week after the 40-year-old Oyster Creek (NJ) reactor's license was extended for another 20 years, plant workers discovered standing water in an on-site cable vault. This water, apparently leaking from two different buried pipes, was contaminated with the radioactive isotope tritium.

A similar leak at the Indian Point (NY) reactor occurred last February in pipes that are part of the primary backup cooling system, which cools the reactor during any unexpected shutdown. The pipes at the Indian Point reactor had not been inspected since 1973 – when the plant was built. These cases are not isolated incidents. Other known or suspected leaky buried piping systems at our nation's nuclear power plants were found in Ohio, California and Illinois.

“Under current regulations, miles and miles of buried pipes within nuclear reactors have never been inspected and will likely never be inspected,” said Markey. **“This is simply unacceptable. As it stands, the NRC requires – at most – a single, spot inspection of the buried piping systems no more than once every 10 years. This cannot possibly be sufficient to ensure the safety of both the public and the plant.”**

"Recent leaks at Indian Point indicate a serious potential for disaster that must be understood and sufficiently monitored to prevent problems," said Rep. Hall, whose Congressional District includes Indian Point. **"The aging buried infrastructure at Indian Point should not be ignored and needs to be a major consideration in Indian Point's re-licensing process. With eight percent of the U.S. population living within 50 miles of Indian Point, any breakdown there would be catastrophic."**

In their GAO request, the Congressmen lay out their questions about the NRC's buried pipe inspection processes, current relevant regulations, and whether they are both adequate and enforced in a manner that is sufficiently protective of reactor and public safety.

A copy of the letter can be found here http://markey.house.gov/docs/gao_buried_pipes.pdf