Activists, supporters sound off on Pilgrim nuclear plant

PLYMOUTH — The Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station has failed to solve problems that have ranked it among the worst performing nuclear plants in the nation, said opponents who turned out for its annual assessment meeting with Entergy Corp. representatives and officials from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission Wednesday.

"At what point does the NRC decide to shut it down," said Karen Vale, a wildlife biologist and coordinator for Cape Cod Bay Watch. "When does the NRC decide the risk is just too big?"

Vale said past shutdowns during storms demonstrate the plant's inability to withstand extreme weather.

The packed meeting at the Radisson Hotel Plymouth Harbor, however, was divided almost equally between anti-Pilgrim activists and supporters.

"We see nuclear power as a vital, clean energy source," said Katie Woods, a North Plymouth resident and civil engineer who works at the plant. "I'm a property owner who lives seven miles from the plant. I wouldn't spend money on an area if I thought it wasn't safe."

Woods said her parents were also in the nuclear industry and her twin sister was employed at Seabrook Station Nuclear Power Plant.

The NRC placed Pilgrim in what is known as the "degraded cornerstone" category last year, because of the number of unplanned shutdowns and shutdowns with complications that occurred in 2013. The status calls for heightened oversight.

While the plant had fewer shutdowns in 2014, giving the Entergy-owned plant the opportunity to return to its previous status, requiring only basic oversight, federal regulators who inspected Pilgrim late last fall concluded the company had not followed through on corrective actions to address shortfalls. The plant is scheduled for another inspection in July to see if deficiencies have been fixed.

Some of the plants that were in the degraded cornerstone category with Pilgrim last year have since been moved to higher performance categories, but Pilgrim remains among five of the 100 commercial plants in the country requiring heightened oversight.

The 2015 year started poorly for Pilgrim which was forced to shut down Jan. 27 for electrical problems in the plant's switch yard and other problems related to a major snowstorm.

NRC Region 1 Administrator Daniel Dorman said Pilgrim's "biggest risk systems" performed effectively during that storm. It was "lower level" issues that complicated that plant shutdown, he said.

"Entergy said they've learned from these storms and will take precautions until they can modify the switch yard." Dorman said. "We look forward to seeing what corrective actions they'll put in place. Meanwhile they'll shut down during storms."

Diane Turco, a Harwich resident and co-founder of the anti-Pilgrim group Cape Downwinders, was critical of federal regulators, saying they operated under the assumption "that Pilgrim will follow through with your recommendations."

"This is serious," Turco said. "It's about our lives and the safety of our families."

She accused the NRC of "putting the public at risk for the profit of a corporation."

"We ask when will you order Pilgrim to be shut down?"

Dorman said conditions at Pilgrim are not a cause for a shutdown.

"We've needed to see more significant safety findings to make that determination," he said.

Many of the 300 people who attended the meeting wore T-shirts and buttons in support of "Pilgrim Power."

And some stepped to the microphone to defend the plant.

Kevin O'Reilly, executive director of the Plymouth Area Chamber of Commerce, talked about the benefits of the Pilgrim plant.

"I hope folks will take into consideration the economic impact the plant brings to the community," he said, pointing to the $10 million annual payment the plant pays Plymouth in lieu of taxes and $350,000 in contributions it makes to local organizations. He also cited the jobs it provides.
"The plant has been a good neighbor," O'Reilly said.

Other speakers expressed concern over the spent fuel pool on top of the reactor, the location of dry casks where some radioactive rods are being stored near Cape Cod Bay, old equipment that keeps breaking down, and the lack of deadlines being issued by nuclear regulators to get problems addressed.

At one point, a small group of opponents raised signs and chanted "shut Pilgrim down."

John Dent, Pilgrim's site vice-president, acknowledged that the plant's performance "did not meet our high standards." The focus now is on leadership, equipment reliability and performance improvement, he said.

Plant officials said they fully expect to pass the NRC's inspection in July.

— Follow Christine Legere on Twitter: @chrislegereCCT

Nuclear plants with problems

Nuclear plants that require heightened oversight because of degraded performance:
Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station - Massachusetts
Point Beach Unit 1 - Wisconsin

Nuclear plants that require increased oversight because of safety findings of high significance:
Arkansas Nuclear Unit 1 - Arkansas
Arkansas Nuclear Unit 2 - Arkansas

Nuclear plant in extended shutdown with significant performance issues:
Fort Calhoun Station - Nebraska

http://www.capecodtimes.com/article/20150318/NEWS/150319382