Inspectors sent to Pilgrim; critics call for crackdown

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But critics of the Plymouth plant are skeptical that the scrutiny will result in the kind of crackdown they’d like to see on Entergy, the plant’s owner and operator. Anti-Pilgrim groups on both sides of the Cape Cod Canal are calling on federal inspectors to keep the plant shuttered until all issues there have been addressed.

“Pilgrim has had more than its share of safety problems,” said Mary Lampert, chairwoman of Pilgrim Watch and a member of the Duxbury Nuclear Advisory Committee. “The NRC allows them to continue to operate with promises they are going to make the fixes. It’s time to say ‘Enough.’ It’s time to put in the fixes before another storm comes.”

Lampert and Rebecca Chin, a fellow nuclear advisory committee member, sent a seven-page letter to federal regulators Monday asking that the plant stay closed until “all corrective actions for risk-significant issues have been completed.”

An NRC spokesman said Monday that there’s nothing to stop the plant from restarting during the inspection.

“We do not have a hold on the plant to keep it from restarting, but we would expect plant personnel to have a good handle on any equipment problems and have run through a readiness checklist prior to restarting,” said agency spokesman Neil Sheehan. “Our resident inspectors assigned to Pilgrim will be closely monitoring restart activities.”

Entergy has invested more than $500 million in new equipment and upgrades to the plant, company spokeswoman Lauren Burm wrote in an email.

“We also continue to investigate the root cause of last week’s events, and are sharing our information with the NRC special inspection team about our procedures and actions taken that helped assure safety at the plant before, during and after the storm,” Burm wrote. “Pilgrim will only bring the plant back online once we’re certain the plant can be operated safely and securely.”

Citizens groups have appealed to the NRC to shut down Pilgrim before the storm because of malfunctions the plant experienced during similar weather in February 2013. The NRC responded that it had inspectors at Pilgrim who would closely monitor the situation. Loss of off-site power at 4 a.m. on Jan. 27 ultimately caused the plant to automatically shut down.

A similar loss of off-site power, followed by automatic shutdown, had occurred in the plant’s switchyard in a February 2013 snowstorm.

“That was due to icicles falling on electrical insulators,” Sheehan said, adding that the switchyard will be a “local point” for this week’s investigation as well.

Among the post-shutdown mechanical glitches that occurred during last week’s storm was the failure of the plant’s high-pressure coolant-injection system, which is used to cool the reactor. The failure was caused by the breakdown of a motor operating the pump.

Operators went to the backup cooling method, opening safety relief valves to let the steam flow into a water containment area. One of the valves, however, registered that it was operating properly, even though it hadn’t opened. When plant workers noticed the failure, they opened another valve.

In its written report to federal regulators, Entergy also noted that a diesel air compressor had failed to start.

“What is it going to take for the NRC to understand that the aging nature of this plant has led to a number of system failures?” asked Sen. Daniel Wolf, a Democrat from Harwich and harsh critic of the power plant. “We need a good, reliable, long-term source of energy, but that’s not the same as continuing with a 42-year-old plant with increasing mechanical problems.”

Meanwhile the Cape Downwinders, Pilgrim Coalition, Cape Cod Bay Watch and Concerned Neighbors of Pilgrim forwarded their own letter to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission on Monday, asking that “Pilgrim not restart since safety cannot be assured to the public.”

“Had there been a need for implementing the emergency response plans, the town of Plymouth and surrounding area roads were impassible with drifting snow several feet deep,” according to the letter. “It would have been impossible for any evacuation in these conditions.”

The letter points out the NRC’s recent decision to keep Pilgrim on a list of the country’s worst-performing reactors, based on an inspection of the plant.

Diane Turco, co-founder of the Cape Downwinders, characterized Pilgrim as a “failed design, run by a failed corporation, with failed oversight.”

“It’s going to result in disaster,” Turco said. “Entergy recklessly operated the plant during a severe storm. If I drove my car recklessly, I’d lose my license. The NRC should revoke Pilgrim’s license.”
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