

## Pilgrim loses power, twice, during storm

Critics say 'I told you so,' NRC says 'No problem'

By Frank Mand

**Wicked Local Plymouth**

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PLYMOUTH — “Dear Mr. Dean,” EcoLaw founder and Pilgrim Coalition member Meg Sheehan wrote to the regional administrator for the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission last Thursday morning. “The Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station on Cape Cod Bay is directly in the path of the historic winter storm due to hit Plymouth, Mass., starting Friday.

“According to information from the National Weather Service,” she wrote, “there could be widespread prolonged power outages, coastal flooding and erosion and hurricane force winds.”

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### Preparation

Sheehan wasn't telling Dean anything he didn't already know, but she was leading up to a special request. Speaking on behalf of her law firm, EcoLaw, and the organization Pilgrim Coalition (which includes more than a dozen environmental and anti-nuclear groups around New England), she wanted the NRC to order Entergy to tell the folks at Pilgrim to “shut it down,” at least until the storm passed.

Later Thursday afternoon, responding to the Coalition's letter, Entergy Nuclear Spokesperson Rob Williams issued the following statement.

“Our plants,” Williams said, referring to all Entergy-owned nuclear plants, “are well prepared for the potential of high winds and heavy snow.”

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As for Pilgrim, itself, Williams said the plant was designed and built to withstand extreme weather conditions.

“We've made preparations for this storm,” Williams continued, “by securing materials on the site and ensuring staffing on the upcoming shifts. We also have back up generators to ensure safety systems are powered.”

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What's this?

### The power goes out

9:17 p.m., Friday, Feb. 8

In a way, it was no different than what happened at thousands of Plymouth homes Friday night. Families prepared for the worst and hoped for the best.

They bought groceries, gassed up their cars, parked at the end of the driveway and, then, poof, the lights went out.

But once the power failed, the similarities ended.

For plant operators there were no relatives to camp out with for a few days.

“The Pilgrim Nuclear Power Plant lost off-site power at 9:17 p.m. Friday due to winter storm Nemo,” NRC Spokesman Neil Sheehan reported. “In response, the reactor, as designed, automatically shut down and the facility's emergency diesel generators activated to provide that power. One of the criteria for a plant to declare an ‘Unusual Event’ – the lowest of four levels of emergency classification – is the loss of off-site power for more than 15 minutes. As such, Pilgrim made that declaration at 10 p.m. Friday.”

There was a surprising response from critics to Pilgrim going offline in the midst of the storm.

“I think many of us were holding our breath a little Friday night into Saturday, knowing that the plant was being hit hard by the storm,” Cape Cod Bay Watch Campaign Director Karen Vale told the *Old Colony*.

“We were relieved when the NRC reported that Pilgrim was taken offline Friday night, when it lost off-site power,” she added. “However, Pilgrim, and all nuclear plants that expect to be impacted by extreme weather events should be shutdown prior to a storm's impact. If safety is top priority, then it just doesn't make sense not to take precautionary rather than remedial measures.”

### The power's back on

10:55 a.m., Sunday, Feb. 10

Williams issued a statement again Sunday, when power was restored.

“Off-site power was restored to the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station earlier today. Site power had been provided by onsite diesel generators since winter storm Nemo disrupted the electric transmission grid resulting in an automatic plant shutdown on Friday.”

Williams also noted that the plant “exited” the Unusual Event classification that morning.

“The plant will be returned to service following the completion of maintenance and testing activities,” Williams added, optimistically.

But Vale wasn't impressed.

“Sure, nuclear plants have made it through extreme weather events in years past, but the difference now is that climate change is here,” she said.

“It wasn't a concern 40 years ago when Pilgrim went online,” Vale continued. “Storms are becoming more intense and more frequent and sea levels are rising, meaning storm surges will be higher and more destructive. This is an enormous concern. You can have the most competent people in the world running the plant, but no one can outmaneuver nature.”

**The power's off, again**

*2 p.m., Sunday, Feb. 10*

It wasn't long after power was restored that power was lost, again.

“Offsite power to Pilgrim station was interrupted this afternoon,” locally based Entergy Spokesperson Carol Wightman wrote in a release.

“The plant is in a cold shutdown condition and Pilgrim's diesel generators are providing power to the site. There is no worker or public safety concern. Plant personnel are troubleshooting the cause of the interruption.”

“There was a setback later in the day,” Neil Sheehan commented later in the week, “when the 345-kilovolt line experienced new problems. Once again, the emergency diesel generators started and supplied the power needed for safety systems until the lines were fully restored.”

“Since the reactor was already in ‘cold’ shutdown condition,” he explained, “Pilgrim did not need to again declare an Unusual Event. NRC inspectors, and for a good part of the weekend the NRC Region I Incident Response Center, closely monitored the storm recovery efforts at Pilgrim. That will continue as repair work is carried out and plans for placing the unit back in service are developed.”

**The power is...**

*Tuesday, Feb. 12*

The plant had power and was once again trying to get back online.

“Off-site power was restored to the Pilgrim nuclear power plant at about midnight last night,” the NRC reported. “A realignment of power flows in the switchyard was required to facilitate the restoration. The plant is supplied power by three off-sites – two 345-kilovolt lines and one 23-kilovolt line. The plant will remain shut down in “cold” status while repair work is done on a reactor safety relief valve. That valve was leaking prior to the storm and was the cause of the reactor operating at reduced power.”

Our resident inspectors assigned to Pilgrim will continue to closely follow the repair work and other activities as the company plans to return the unit to service.

For the NRC and Entergy the storm was further proof that the right procedures are in place to protect residents.

For critics it was a warning that should be heeded.

“Storms of this nature demonstrate that we need to think about Pilgrim's ongoing operations, but also the long-term storage of highly radioactive nuclear waste,” Pine duBois said.

“Flood levels during the storm indicate that the town of Plymouth should be closely evaluating the current attempts by Entergy to establish a permanent storage area for highly radioactive waste extremely close to shore and below a safe elevation,” she concluded. “Decommissioning the site may be the only answer to this problem.”

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Keep rolling the dice and sooner or later you (Entergy) will roll craps! You (Entergy)are playing with a disaster here! Shut that nuclear waste dump down before it shuts us down!

wedgeb

4 months ago

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Yes you are right... we have a Mark 1 nuclear waste dump on the South Shore named Pilgrim, in the town that started it all. With all of the problems this place has wouldn't you think that the people we elect would be all over this company? Not even close. They are the big dogs in town and the town leaders bow to them. It should be the other way around especially after what happened over in Fukushima... Someday the beautiful town where it all began will become a ghost town.

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