

# Radioactivity detected in dirt pile near Pilgrim

By Larry Tye  
Globe Staff

Tests have turned up low levels of radioactivity in a large dirt pile near the Pilgrim nuclear plant, and some of the dirt washed into a protected wetlands area on the reactor site, the state Department of Public Health said yesterday.

Radiation levels were within federally accepted standards, said spokesman John Stobierski, but "the department is upset to see this kind of carelessness in the handling of radioactive materials, and we want assurances from them that this is not going to happen again."

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission "has no safety concern" about the contaminated dirt, said Randy Blough, who oversees Pilgrim at the NRC regional office. But he added that "the piles should not be allowed to erode."

The dirt was piled near the plant parking lot during construction over the last four to five years, said Elaine Robinson, a spokeswoman for Boston Edison Co., which owns Pilgrim. Plants like Pilgrim "do emit certain amounts of radiation," she said, and over time it apparently collected in the dirt.

Plant officials discovered the erosion and notified conservation officials in Plymouth because dirt had leaked into a wetlands area, Robinson said. The wetlands are protected by state law even though they are on Edison property.

The pile is 5,000 cubic yards, but dirt that eroded could fit into 10 to 20 wheelbarrels, Robinson said. "Right now we are putting bales of hay around it and covering it with [a] tarp. The dirt will remain on site."

Thomas Sowdon, Pilgrim's chief radiological scientist, said his measurements of the dirt pile detected three radioactive materials - cesium-134, cesium-137 and cobalt-60. But he called

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the levels "completely inconsequential." Robinson said, "If I were to spend a year on the dirt pile it would be the equivalent of watching color television for 20 hours."

Stobierski said Health Department measurements also showed very low levels of radioactivity, but he added that the department will investigate leaks from the plant that allowed contaminants to escape.

The Health Department is already studying whether radiation from Pilgrim could have caused elevated levels of cancer reported in five towns near the plant. Edison officials insist Pilgrim's emissions are harmless, but other health specialists say no level of radiation is safe.

Sen. William Golden (D-Weymouth), a Pilgrim critic, last night said, "This is further evidence of callousness and mismanagement by Boston Edison in areas of grave safety concern to citizens of Massachusetts." Golden said he will ask the Health Department to determine whether radiation has leaked onto Plymouth beaches or nearby cranberry bogs.

But Sowdon said he regularly tests beaches and bogs and has found almost no radioactivity.

Pilgrim was closed 21 months ago for equipment troubles and has remained closed to correct new equipment and management problems. Edison has said it will be ready to reopen early next month, but the NRC promises a thorough review, and Attorney General James Shannon has vowed to sue unless his safety concerns are addressed.

Stobierski said the Health Department is urging plant owners "to seek permission from the NRC if they are going to store this low-level radioactive waste on site."

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