
By Heather Lightner

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OF NUCLEAR INTEREST: Nuclear bills to increase protections

Recently, the state of Massachusetts has begun to address the very real, potential financial and environmental consequences that may occur due to the existence of Entergy's Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station and its decommissioning.

In 2014, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) degraded the performance rating of Entergy's Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station. This determination was based on excessive shutdowns in 2013, placing it among the nine worst performing reactors in the country and requiring closer scrutiny by federal inspectors. A year later, the NRC continued to classify Pilgrim as one of the worst performers among nuclear power plants in the country, because Pilgrim had still failed to correct problems from 2013. So far in 2015, Pilgrim has already had three unplanned shutdowns among a variety of other problems, and the NRC just announced that it has downgraded Pilgrim's performance rating yet again.

Pilgrim is now one of only three reactors in the U.S. that have this low performance rating and is just one step away from mandatory shutdown by federal regulators. Whether it is due to a mandatory shutdown, or a decision made by Entergy down the road, Pilgrim will inevitably be decommissioned.

Recently, the state of Massachusetts has begun to address the very real, potential financial and environmental consequences that may occur due to the existence of Entergy's Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station and its decommissioning. In response – and to protect the town of Plymouth and the commonwealth – several nuclear-related bills have been drafted and are pending at the State House.

Two Senate bills, S. 1798 and S. 1797, are focused on providing Plymouth and the commonwealth monetary compensation. Senate Bill 1798, if passed, would require Pilgrim to pay an annual \$25 million post-closure funding fee into a trust fund to ensure there is sufficient money for cleanup of the Pilgrim site once operations have ceased. Pilgrim's decommissioning fund – \$896.42 million at the end of 2014 – is most likely inadequate given that it could cost \$1.23 billion to decommission the smaller Entergy plant, Vermont Yankee. If funds for decommissioning are insufficient, citizens could be left with paying the difference. Connecticut rate payers had to pay a \$480 million shortfall for the cleanup of the Connecticut Yankee plant following its permanent closure in 1996 – a fate that may befall Massachusetts if Senate Bill 1798 does not pass.

Without sufficient decommissioning funds, Entergy will inevitably put Pilgrim into something called SAFSTOR – essentially meaning “moth balled in place.” The NRC does not require decommissioning to be completed (dismantlement and clean-up) until 60 years after plant shutdown. During SAFSTOR, Pilgrim staff will be drastically reduced and contributions to the state for environmental monitoring will likely be eliminated, leaving Plymouth and the commonwealth with the burden of storing of tons of highly radioactive nuclear waste, perhaps indefinitely.

The Massachusetts attorney general estimated that Pilgrim is vulnerable to a spent fuel pool fire that could cause up to \$488 billion dollars in damages. The economic consequences of a spent fuel fire would be devastating not only for Plymouth, but also cities and towns within a 50-plus mile radius – including the Cape and Islands. Senate bill 1797 imposes a fee on spent nuclear fuel stored in wet pools (spent fuel pools). The fee will accomplish two goals: thin the spent fuel pool and lessen the offsite economic costs associated with a spent fuel pool fire. The fee would generate millions of dollars that would be divided between Plymouth, other impacted towns, and the commonwealth.

To help pass nuclear legislation pending at the State House, write to your state senators and representatives and ask them to support these important bills. For more information, please visit www.pilgrimcoalition.org.

Heather Lightner is a registered nurse in Plymouth and president of Concerned Neighbors of Pilgrim, a local, grassroots group focused on safer storage of spent nuclear fuel at Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station. She serves on the Plymouth Nuclear Matters Committee and is a volunteer for Cape Cod Bay Watch. The opinions expressed here are hers and do not reflect the official position of the NMC.

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