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October 13, 2015 12:50PM

OF NUCLEAR INTEREST: Pilgrim's long term legacy: Nuclear waste & Cape Cod Bay

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Entergy's Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station, located in Plymouth, is making headlines these days. On October 13, 2015, Entergy announced it plans to run Pilgrim for about four more years, closing it no later than June, 2019. Entergy set this timetable despite the well-publicized regulatory and operational failures that are plaguing the reactor. In September, 2015, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) named Pilgrim one of the worst run nuclear reactors in the country – labeling it Category IV – one step away from a NRC-mandated shutdown due to its poor management and regulatory violations.

Letting Pilgrim run for another four years means more toxic pollution of Cape Cod Bay, continued unlicensed and unpermitted contamination of the Plymouth-Carver Sole Source Aquifer, and more “near misses” during emergency scrams. Entergy's own documents show contamination of the soil and groundwater with toxic radionuclides. Over the last 43 years, Pilgrim has leaked, dumped and discharged toxic nuclear waste and other pollutants into the environment. Entergy uses Cape Cod Bay as a dumping ground for hot, contaminated cooling water. This has destroyed marine life and denuded and scoured the ocean floor and shoreline in front of Pilgrim.

All of Pilgrim's highly toxic radioactive nuclear waste is stored at the site with nowhere to go. It is highly radioactive for hundreds of thousands of years. When Pilgrim opened in 1972, the plan was to send the nuclear waste off-site, but that has not happened. The buildings themselves are so contaminated with toxic radionuclides they will probably be encapsulated and stored on site forever.

Keeping this nuclear waste on-site means Entergy has to maintain a “protected area” around Pilgrim to try to prevent terrorist attacks and other threats. The protected area extends out to sea 500 yards into Cape Cod Bay and covers one mile of shoreline. This area is off limits as long as the nuclear waste is stored there – perhaps forever. No walking along the beach, boating, fishing or swimming. Keep out, no trespassing.

Under public trust law, the Massachusetts shoreline, including the one-mile of Cape Cod Bay in front of Pilgrim, belongs to everyone. If Entergy is going to keep the public out and use the shoreline as a private nuclear waste storage area, it should compensate the public. Our elected officials should enforce the public trust law to protect the public's rights.

The massive scale of the problems of toxic nuclear waste, pollution, and Entergy's taking of the shoreline defy imagination. All elected officials and state regulators need to use the full extent of their authority to protect the public's rights to a clean environment, a safe community, and use and enjoyment of Cape Cod Bay. The insidious story of nuclear power – nuclear waste, pollution, and shoreline exclusion – cannot be swept under the rug any longer.

Meg Sheehan is a Plymouth native and volunteer attorney working with a network of citizen groups, including Cape Cod Bay Watch, to protect the public health and environment.

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