
By Brian Sullivan

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OF NUCLEAR INTEREST: The ISIS threat and spent fuel pool vulnerability

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With the current ISIS threat, something needs to be done to step up security of spent fuel pools at nuclear facilities throughout the U.S. – including at Entergy’s Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station in Plymouth. This is particularly true in light of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s recent decision not to expedite spent fuel transfer from wet pool storage to dry casks.

Our Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station has been spotlighted as one of the eight nuclear power plants most at risk to water-based terrorist attack in the country, according to a 2013 report commissioned by the Pentagon. In the spring of 1998, terrorism expert Stephen Gale, of the University of Pennsylvania, presented an analysis to FAA security officials which pointed to the potential of terrorists crashing planes into nuclear facilities along the East Coast.

U.S. officials have said that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed told investigators that his original plan was to have some of his pilots fly commandeered planes into nuclear power plants and, according to the 9/11 Commission report, Mohamed Atta considered the possibility of targeting a nuclear facility he had seen during a familiarization flight near New York. In addition, there was a plan uncovered by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 2003 to hijack a commercial airliner and fly it into the Seabrook Nuclear Power Station in New Hampshire.

The spent fuel pool at Pilgrim is at full capacity. Instead of moving all spent fuel that can be moved from wet pool storage to dry casks, Pilgrim’s current plan calls for removing just enough fuel assemblies from the pool on a periodic basis to keep pace with usage.

The town of Plymouth and residents from surrounding towns have intensified efforts during the past year to demand increased security and safety measures at Pilgrim, but have been stymied time and again by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) and Entergy. Even despite Sen. Markey’s proposed bill (Dry Cask Storage Act of 2014), the NRC and Entergy don’t seem willing to budge. As a result, we here in Plymouth own a problem created by the federal government, and they (the NRC and Entergy) aren’t willing to reduce the risk we face by requiring a timely reduction in the number of spent fuel assemblies left in the pool and transferring them to dispersed and hardened dry-cask storage.

Plymouth’s concerns regarding the long-term storage of high-level nuclear waste are a microcosm of what is happening across America. The federal government’s failure to develop proposed storage at Skull Valley in Utah and Yucca Mountain in Nevada is why we now are looking at a portion of our town being set aside for nuclear waste. We didn’t sign on for that back in the early ’70s and neither did those communities’ contiguous to plants throughout the country.

My interest in this is purely as a Plymouth resident whose family lives a short distance from Pilgrim. My background as a retired FAA special agent and retired Military Police officer, who spent time in the Army’s nuclear surety program, gives me a certain degree of expertise and awareness. I recognize that the Pilgrim is a symbolic target because of its location here in America’s Hometown.

A New England nuclear disaster would kill thousands and reduce property values to zero. The current threat from ISIS and the recent Fukushima (2011) incident have the American people on alert. Unfortunately, our federal government and the NRC continue to watch “as Rome burns.”

Brian Sullivan is a retired Military Police officer and FAA special agent. He has worked in the Army’s nuclear surety program, served as a Civil Defense director for the town of Brookfield and has numerous hours of training in civil defense management and emergency preparedness as a former member of the Massachusetts Army National Guard.

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