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By Meg Sheehan

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OF NUCLEAR INTEREST: Ending Pilgrim's use of Cape Cod Bay

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For more than 40 years, the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station in Plymouth has taken water out of Cape Cod Bay to cool equipment and condense steam produced for electricity generation. The bay is a natural resource that belongs to all of us, and we have a right to a healthy and thriving environment. Designated as an "Ocean Sanctuary" in the early 1970s, the Bay provides excellent habitat for fish, whales and other aquatic life. A healthy bay also sets the foundation for our local economy in many ways by supporting tourism, fishing and recreation.

Pilgrim uses up to a half-billion gallons of water from Cape Cod Bay every day that it operates. Pilgrim's use of the bay is regulated by the state and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the Clean Water Act. The permit is issued jointly with the state, meaning the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection also has the power to enforce the law.

When Pilgrim pumps in water from the Bay, it also kills aquatic life that either gets trapped on the intake screens ("impinged"), or gets pulled through the screens into the internal piping ("entrained"). After Pilgrim uses the seawater for cooling, the water is dumped back into the bay heated and polluted. The water has a temperature increase of up to 32°F and contains chemicals such as corrosion inhibitors, chlorine, and radioactive materials. These discharges are part of Pilgrim's routine operations.

The federal Clean Water Act requires EPA to review permits every five years to ensure industrial polluters like Pilgrim are using the "best available technology" in order to minimize the intake of water, harm to marine life, and pollution. When Congress enacted the Clean Water Act more than 40 years ago the goal was to eliminate pollution by constantly requiring better technology and improving pollution controls.

EPA first issued Pilgrim's Clean Water Act permit in 1983. Pilgrim's water pollution permit expired 18 years ago, and EPA has not taken the necessary steps to renew it or ensure that the best available technology is being used by the plant.

Entergy, Pilgrim's owner, uses the same destructive, outdated "once-through" cooling water system it installed when Pilgrim opened in 1972. By allowing Pilgrim to continue using destructive pollution control technology that is more than 40 years old, EPA is allowing Entergy use and harm our public resources.

Cape Cod Bay Watch, a local environmental campaign, recently asked EPA to terminate Pilgrim's Clean Water Act permit, because it is so outdated and the agency has not taken steps to renew it. In 2012, local residents issued a notice of intent to sue Entergy over its water pollution. Shortly after that, EPA promised the citizens it would renew Pilgrim's permit by December 2013. EPA broke its promise.

EPA's 18-year delay in renewing Entergy's water pollution permit means there is no realistic expectation that Pilgrim's pollution and destruction of marine life will stop. The law does not provide a right to an indefinite right to pollute. The law provides that such permits can be terminated by the EPA. Terminating Entergy's permit will perhaps result in an alternative, more innovative approach to power production at Pilgrim, and Cape Cod Bay could then be restored for all to enjoy.

Meg Sheehan is a Plymouth native and graduate of Plymouth Carver High School. She is a public interest environmental attorney and volunteers with Cape Cod Bay Watch, Pilgrim Coalition and other regional conservation groups.

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