

NUKE MATTERS: Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, Fukushima...Plymouth?

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Wicked Local Plymouth

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What's this?

The Fukushima facility was scheduled to retire in 2011 after 40 years of operation; however its license was renewed for an additional 10 years. Like Fukushima, Pilgrim's license was due to expire in June 2012, but was relicensed by the NRC this past May to operate until 2032 – despite design flaws, an outdated cooling system, multiple state and federal water quality violations, lack of valid permits and environmental assessments, and unresolved litigation with the NRC concerning these issues.

Inadequate evacuation plans

The Fukushima disaster resulted in widespread radioactive contamination and more than 100,000 people displaced from their homes. The American Embassy recommended that Americans within 50 miles of the disaster site evacuate.

Pilgrim's evacuation plan currently only considers advising people within 10 miles to evacuate – not nearly large enough to prevent risk of cancer, disease and birth defects for individuals outside of this region. Pilgrim is located in a densely populated area with an infrastructure incapable of a timely evacuation. Further, Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) lacks an evacuation plan for Cape Cod and the Islands if a nuclear disaster were to occur.

Too close for comfort

Although Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima are indelibly etched in our memory, bear in mind that from 1952-2009 there have been 99 major nuclear power station incidents worldwide. To learn how you can help prevent Plymouth from becoming another nuclear accident zone, please visit capecodbaywatch.org.

Cape Cod Bay Watch is dedicated to protecting and restoring water quality and marine life in Cape Cod Bay through public education, networking, and advocacy. Its current priority is addressing the harmful effects of the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station – especially its destructive "once-through cooling" system – on water quality and marine life in the bay.

[i] *Democracy Now* Interview with Arnie Gunderson. March 2012. "Nuclear engineer Arnie Gunderson: Fukushima meltdown could result in 1 million cases of cancer." Transcript available at http://www.democracynow.org/2012/3/12/nuclear_engineer_arnie_gunderson_fukushima_meltdown

Three Mile Island in 1979, Chernobyl in 1986, and most recently Fukushima – these catastrophic nuclear accidents thrust the debate about the safety of nuclear power into the public spotlight.

Fukushima also triggered a critical examination of nuclear stations with the same type and operational design as the reactors that failed in March 2011. In the U.S., there are 23 reactors with the same design as Fukushima – including Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station (Pilgrim) on Cape Cod Bay in Plymouth.

Like Fukushima, Pilgrim is not immune to serious natural disasters or human error. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC; the regulatory body that oversees nuclear safety in the U.S.) risk estimates rank Pilgrim second in the nation for likelihood that an earthquake could cause core damage – a risk that has increased 763 percent since the 1980s. In 1986, an emergency shutdown was required due to recurring equipment problems, which lead to a Senate hearing on the safety of Pilgrim. Again, just this past spring, the facility was shut down after an equipment failure.

Mark I reactor

Pilgrim is a General Electric Mark I reactor, a design criticized by both nuclear experts and the NRC as being susceptible to containment failure and explosion. The Mark I reactor is designed to contain steam that builds up from overheating. It diverts steam into a tank, or "torus," where it condenses and reduces pressure inside the reactor containment building.

The inability of the Mark I reactor to handle immense pressure buildup in an emergency led Pilgrim to install a relief vent as a quick "fix." The same vent design was tested three times in Fukushima and failed, resulting in three explosions. The unfiltered vent would also release harmful radiation directly into the environment if an accident were to occur.

Arnie Gunderson, a former nuclear industry leader, told *Democracy Now* that all reactors with the Mark I design should be shut down – due to the faulty relief vents and the fact that Mark I reactors are set up so fuel is stored unsafely near the facility roofs.**[i]** Essentially, they are inherently unsafe. Mr. Gunderson stated, "*there's more nuclear Cesium-137 in the fuel pool at the plant in Pilgrim, Massachusetts, than was ever released by every nuclear bomb ever exploded in the atmosphere.*"

Aging structure

Nuclear facilities are licensed to operate for forty years and all have experienced age-related degradation before the termination of their original license. Despite this, the NRC continues to extend licenses to facilities throughout the U.S.

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