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Opponents slam Entergy's plan for backup cooling at Pilgrim

DEP held a hearing on Entergy's request for a waterways permit for backup cooling system which would be used in an extreme event such as a hurricane.

PLYMOUTH - More than 100 concerned residents urged state environmental officials on Tuesday to deny Entergy's requested permit for a back-up cooling system at the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station, calling the design "Mickey Mouse" and a "Rube Goldberg contraption."

The proposed system, part of a post-Fukushima requirement instituted by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, would be used if some extreme or "beyond-design basis" event - such as an earthquake, tornado or hurricane - knocked out all power both on and off site.

The system would consist of moorings anchored underwater in the channel where the main cooling system is located, a pulley system with 3/4-inch nylon rope, a pump and a semi-rigid suction pipe to draw water to cool the plant. Equipment to operate the system would be stored and taken by truck to the mean water line during the emergency.

"The public wants to make sure this pretend solution isn't approved so a real solution can be found," said Mary Lampert, a Duxbury resident and founder of the anti-nuclear group Pilgrim Watch.

Tuesday's hearing was called by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection in reaction to requests from the public.

Falmouth resident Lillia Frantin wanted to know whether the system outlined by Entergy's engineer during the hearing was in use anywhere else or was just "some paper product."

"We'd like to have photographic documentation that this is effective," Frantin said.

A spokeswoman for Entergy later confirmed the system would be the first of its kind.

"I think we're one of the leaders in this technology," said Lauren Burm.

Pilgrim plant staff, perhaps with some help from Plymouth firefighters, would hook the system up and operate it, according to the proposed plan.

"We should not have a system that's for bringing in a dinghy during the summer," Lampert said.

She said the storage sheds for the equipment were reminiscent of "old Boy Scout camp days."

"In an event, you'd expect debris," Lampert said. "It means there's no assurance the equipment will get where it's needed."

Truro resident Brian Boyle lives across Cape Cod Bay and said he could see the plant through binoculars.

"I want to paint the picture of being in a hurricane and trying to operate this system," Boyle said. "Anyone asking a human being to go out in those conditions would be asking for their death.

"I don't see how this could possibly work without injury to human beings," he continued. "You need to send them back to the drawing board.

Entergy, asked for comment following the hearing, disagreed with the criticism.

"The NRC has fully vetted the water-intake system and found it to be an acceptable measure for an additional water source to cool the reactor," the company wrote in a statement. "It is important to note that the mooring and intake system is one of five options for providing a cooling water source to the reactor in the event of a loss of on-site and off-site power. Depending on the beyond-design basis event (hurricane, earthquake, etc.) a decision would be made as to what the best alternate source of water would be and plant personnel would implement that system."

NRC spokesman Neil Sheehan said later Tuesday that Entergy's proposed system was only one of several layers for emergency cooling. "They have pumps that would operate in the immediate aftermath," he said. "What they want, in the very low probability scenario, is to have the ability to pump water from the bay for cooling purposes."

DEP representatives expect to make a decision on the water handling permit request some time after the first of the year.

Follow Christine Legere on Twitter: @chrislegere@CCT



More than 100 people turned out to criticize Entergy's proposed emergency cooling system during a meeting on Tuesday at Plymouth Town Hall. Christine Legere/Cape Cod Times.

COMMENT PERIOD

Public comment on Entergy's proposed back-up cooling system for the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station will be accepted until Dec. 8. Submit to David Hill, Environmental Engineer, DEP Waterways Regulation Program, 20 Riverside Drive, Lakeville, MA 02347.

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