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By Christine Legere
clegere@capecodonline.com

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Storm shuts Pilgrim nuclear plant

Prior to this week's storm, several area watchdog groups called on federal regulators to shut down the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station during the event, but ultimately electrical problems on and off site forced the reactor to power down.

Before this week's storm, watchdog groups called on federal regulators to shut down Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station during the blizzard that on Tuesday paralyzed the state.

Instead, it was electrical problems on and off site that forced the reactor to power down.

The plant was lowered to 80 percent power Monday night in anticipation of the storm, Nuclear Regulatory Commission spokesman Neil Sheehan said. NRC assigned inspectors to the site to advise staff for Entergy Corp., which owns and operates the Plymouth plant.

"After one of the two 345-kilovolt lines that supplies off-site power from the grid to the plant went down, Pilgrim operators began reducing power further," Sheehan said. "The reactor was at about 50 percent power when the second 345-KV line went down."

Plymouth Fire Chief Ed Bradley said the plant switched to its own generators which operate safety systems as soon as problems with offsite power began. But, Pilgrim also experienced problems with outgoing power to the grid.

"During the power down, transmission lines that deliver power out of the station froze," Bradley said.

The problems triggered an automatic shutdown of the reactor at about 4 a.m. Tuesday. The reactor's protection system is designed to automatically shut down in such circumstances, according to Sheehan.

"The exact cause of the loss of 345-KV power lines is still being investigated," Sheehan said. Arcing in the plant's switchyard may have caused the offsite power loss, but further investigation is needed, he said.

Arcing occurs when electricity jumps from a transmission line to nearby metal. Storm conditions, particularly at a plant adjacent to wind-driven salt water, can cause arcing, according to David Lochbaum, director of nuclear safety for the Union of Concerned Scientists.

"The response was the way it was designed to be," Lochbaum said about the shutdown.

Lauren Burm, spokeswoman for Entergy, said more information about what caused the two transmission lines to go out should be available once the storm lets up and inspectors get a closer look at the plant's switchyard. The plant has enough fuel to power the generators for 10 days and can bring in more, Burm said.

Diane Turco, co-founder of the anti-Pilgrim group Cape Downwinders, said she was relieved that circumstances forced the shutdown.

Referring to shortcomings at the plant cited by the NRC inspectors in a report released Monday, Turco called emergencies at the plant "predictable."

"Instead of telling them to try again, the NRC should be saying you're not meeting standards and we're shutting you down," Turco said. "If there had been an emergency at the plant this week, there could have been no evacuation. The situation would have been the perfect storm."

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