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By James Garb

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More bad news for Pilgrim nuke plant

As of this writing, the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station in Plymouth is off line due to several equipment malfunctions following an emergency shutdown (known as a “scram”) during the blizzard of Jan. 27. The initial shutdown is thought to be due to a loss of offsite power to the plant resulting from the storm.

But the more troublesome part of the story is what happened next. The station experienced several equipment issues in the course of cooling down following the scram. These included the station diesel air compressor which failed to start, a safety relief valve that could not be operated manually from the control room, and the failure of a gland seal motor that provides high-pressure coolant injection. This does not inspire confidence.

These events occurred a day after the release of an extensive investigative report by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission detailing their findings surrounding four scrams at Pilgrim in 2013. The NRC, it should be noted, is part oversight agency and part lobbyist for the nuclear power industry – all in all, a good friend of the industry. These four scrams in one year resulted in Pilgrim being placed under increased safety scrutiny by the NRC.

The NRC report is 48 pages long. In its accompanying letter to the Pilgrim site vice president, the NRC made several statements that are of great concern. In evaluating the response of Entergy (Pilgrim’s parent company) to the four scrams in 2013, the NRC said the following:

“Although inspectors determined that, in general, Entergy’s problem identification, cause evaluation, and corrective action plans (CAP) ... were adequate, they identified deficiencies regarding Entergy’s execution of corrective actions ... as well as Entergy’s understanding of some of the causes of the issues. Specifically, inspectors identified several examples where corrective actions were not completed as intended or were closed prematurely. Additionally, for one of the root cause evaluations, inspectors determined that Entergy failed to investigate a deficient condition in accordance with the CAP requirements to ensure they fully understood all of the causes of one of the scram events.”

The NRC further stated “Inspectors determined that corrective actions identified to improve performance in this area have not been effective. Ultimately, inspectors determined that your actions in total did not provide the assurance level required to meet inspection objectives and represent a significant weakness.”

This report addressing the four scrams in 2013 and the events of this past week heighten concerns about the safety of Pilgrim. This is an aging plant that is not being well maintained, and it was a flawed design to begin with. Now we have damning documentation by the NRC that corrective action plans are not being taken seriously, to the point where the NRC questions whether Entergy even understood all of the causes of one of the scrams. While the NRC did not directly blame the safety culture at the plant for these scrams, they did cite corrective action plan weakness identified in the safety culture review, and their report does identify other aspects of the plant’s safety culture that require attention, including issues with training, communication and understanding of the accountability model. One could conclude that the NRC let plant management off easy on the safety culture assessment.

If the NRC is concerned, we should be concerned as well. Pilgrim is in our back yard. As everyone knows, a disaster at Pilgrim would leave Cape Cod residents with no viable evacuation option. The handwriting on the wall could not be clearer. How many of these events will we tolerate before a situation occurs at the plant that can’t be contained? Pilgrim should be closed now before a perfect storm of an aging, failing plant, poor maintenance of critical systems, and a deficient safety culture result in a serious radiation leak that could alter life on Cape Cod for generations to come.

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