OF NUCLEAR INTEREST: Nuclear bills important post-closure

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Nuclear facilities across the country routinely receive exemptions from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission after shutdown that relieves them of important safety requirements. For example, Entergy’s Kewaunee Power Station in Wisconsin was exempted from some federal emergency planning requirements after it shut down in 2013. The exemption was based on the assertion that reactors that shut down have a significantly lower risk of offsite release of radioactivity. However, nuclear waste, or “spent fuel,” that remains in wet pool storage post-shutdown, as well as spent fuel stored on-site in dry casks, still pose dangerous threats of radioactive release. A 2006 report to the Massachusetts attorney general found that a large release of radioactivity due to a spent pool fire could result in damages up to about $488 billion and 24,000 latent cancers.

Entergy also recently secured an exemption to use some of its decommissioning trust fund to manage spent fuel at its Vermont Yankee plant, which shut down in December 2014. This is in direct contrast with the NRC’s current regulations, which strictly limit the use of the funds until radiological decontamination is complete. The agency, however, has allowed this change to happen and will likely allow it again at Pilgrim.

As residents and taxpayers, we must insist that the NRC do its job and ensure that decommissioning funds are used exclusively for cleanup of dangerous radioactive materials and protecting citizens with offsite emergency preparedness and planning.

What has happened at other facilities can happen at Pilgrim, but due to the wisdom and foresight of several legislators there are several bills now before two Massachusetts joint committees that will help protect us from changes being maneuvered by Entergy.

Sponsored by Sen. Dan Wolf, D-Hyannis, Bill S.1797 establishes a fee on wet pool storage of spent nuclear fuel. Bill S.1797 aims to protect the economic interests of the commonwealth by giving nuclear plant owners a strong incentive to reduce the number of highly radioactive spent fuel assemblies in Pilgrim’s pool.

Another of Sen. Wolf’s bills, S.1798, establishes funding for post-closure activities and helps the commonwealth deal with serious economic risks if Entergy does not have enough money put aside to decommission Pilgrim quickly and completely. If Bill S.1798 is successful, Entergy would be required to pay an annual $25 million post-closure funding fee. Through discussions with union leaders (AFL-CIO) and Republican Sen. Vinny deMacedo, of Plymouth, S.1798 is evolving and will likely include funding for programs for displaced workers and retiring employees at Pilgrim. This new bi-partisan effort bodes well for thousands of residents that will be affected by Pilgrim’s closure.

Other important bills include Rep. Jim Cantwell’s (D-Marshfield) H.1898, which proposes to increase safety preparedness by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health from a 10 to 20 mile radius. Rep. Sarah Peake, D-Provincetown, and others have introduced three bills. Bill H.2030 would authorize MassDPH to enhance radiological air monitoring, H.2031 would increase safety preparedness by MassDPH to 50 miles, and H.2167 would require the state to assess preparedness plans for radiological accidents at Pilgrim and Seabrook nuclear facilities.

In order for these bills to become one step closer to becoming law, they need to pass favorably out of the Joint Committees during the second leg of the 2015-2016 legislative session in early January. The discussion will then be open to all representatives of our legislative bodies. Residents should weigh in on these bills locally and tell their representatives and senators that they fully support these important bills.

On the federal level, the NRC has requested comments from the public until March 18 on its plans to develop new decommissioning regulations. It is incumbent on us to add our voice at the federal level as well. The proposed regulations and directions to comment can be found on the federal government’s rulemaking website, www.regulations.gov and using Docket ID NRC-2015-0070.

Janet Azarovitz is a Falmouth resident and a member of Cape Downwinders Cooperative, which works to protect the welfare of residents of the Cape and the Islands from nuclear-related risks. She is also a representative of the Pilgrim Legislative Advisory Coalition, which seeks to achieve passage of nuclear-related legislation. Cape Downwinders Cooperative works collaboratively with Cape Cod Bay Watch.

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