

By [Frank Mand](#)

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PILGRIM STATION: Critics want broader discussion of impact on environment

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Following a meeting between plant critics and Nuclear Regulatory Chairman Allison Macfarlane, several groups led by the Earthrise Law Center and including locally based Cape Cod Bay Watch, called on the NRC to add a new condition to the plant's license, requiring Pilgrim's owners to report occurrences, sightings or interactions with certain officially listed endangered and threatened marine species near Pilgrim. That was not in the relicensing documents but that may have been a mistake.

At one point, the NRC apparently thought there was such a condition in the new license. It said so in communications with the National Marine Fisheries Service, when discussing the pending relicensing of the plant in 2012.

When critics heard that discussion referenced, they went looking for it in the license. It wasn't there.

NRC Public Affairs Officer Neil Sheehan said the NRC relied on an opinion from the National Marine Fisheries Service that found the plant was not likely to take any endangered species during the 20 years of its new license. But the NRC is reviewing the matter and could change Pilgrim's license or ask Entergy to submit an amendment requiring monitoring for endangered and threatened species.

Entergy cited the same report but offered what may be a third option – a supplemental monitoring program.

"Although Pilgrim's operations have not changed since the NMFS issued its report, the possible sighting of a Northern right whale and her calf in the vicinity of Pilgrim earlier this year has prompted Pilgrim to take additional action. To provide further assurance, Entergy is developing a supplemental monitoring program for Pilgrim that will be submitted to the NRC by the end of 2013," Pilgrim External Affairs spokesperson Joyce McMahon said.

The plant's critics like that idea, but admit they want more.

Cape Cod Bay Watch makes the case that Pilgrim needs an expensive new cooling system to protect a variety of important local species. Initially, the state asked for a "closed-cycle" cooling system to avoid potential harm a "once-through" cooling system could cause to the Bay. A closed-cycle system reuses water, recycling it rather than using it once and discharging it back into the Bay.

Environmentalists favored the closed-cycle system because it uses 95 percent less water, dramatically lessening the effect on the Bay. But Boston Edison, the plant's original owner, challenged the closed-cycle mandate and installed the cheaper once-through system.

Bay Watch argues that water sucked through Pilgrim's intake now unnecessarily harms and often kills herring and other prey fish, plankton, fish eggs, larvae and other sea life.

"Regulators must use their authority to protect this special resource in the face of threats such as Pilgrim," Karen Vale, of Bay Watch, said.

But the NRC argues that additional protections are already in place, noting that the studies done during the relicensing period considered the impact on even more species than the NMFS report.

Do the plant's critics really think an obscure reference to a missing condition might force the plant's owners to invest in an expensive new cooling system?

Earthrise Law Center's Kevin Cassidy sees it as a way to open a broader discussion of the plant's environmental protection systems.

Pilgrim is already operating under a Clean Water Act permit that technically expired 18 years ago. A new draft permit was supposed to be finished by now, Cassidy said, but it appears to have stalled.

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