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OF NUCLEAR INTEREST: Public hearing: Pilgrim's water discharge permit

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On July 21, at 6:15 p.m., the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is hosting a public hearing and informational session at the Plymouth Public Library on South Street, in Plymouth, regarding Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station's new draft Clean Water Act "NPDES" permit.

Under the Federal Clean Water Act, EPA runs a range of water quality programs that set standards for water quality and regulates pollutants discharged into our waters. One of these programs is the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit program. The NPDES program addresses water pollution by giving EPA and most states control over industrial and municipal pollution. Dischargers, like Pilgrim, are required to obtain and meet the standards and limits articulated in NPDES permits.

Pilgrim's massive water consumption and discharges of a variety of pollutants into Cape Cod Bay are governed by its current NPDES permit, which expired in 1996. This is one of the longest expired permits in the nation. NPDES permits are supposed to be updated every five years to ensure the most protective requirements, conditions, and technologies are being used to safeguard our Nation's waters — in this case, Cape Cod Bay. Pilgrim's current permit has been administratively extended since 1996, meaning two decades have gone by without proper regulatory or public review. Further, no new measures to mitigate environmental damages or updates to technologies have been required.

In May 2016, and after several years of considerable public pressure, EPA finally issued the long-anticipated, new NPDES permit for Pilgrim. The agency is seeking written input from the public about the proposed permit; comments are due July 25. Due to the high-level of public interest in this issue, EPA has also scheduled a hearing on July 21. At the hearing, EPA will provide information about the draft permit and individuals will be given the opportunity to offer verbal comments to the agency, as well as ask questions about the permit.

The draft permit contains requirements and conditions that apply to Pilgrim for the remainder of operations, as well as different requirements that will apply after it stops generating electricity by the end of May 2019. It is important to recognize that pollutant discharges and water intake, although reduced, will not end after shutdown. The draft permit establishes pollutant limits and conditions for discharges that continue post-shutdown. Monitoring those discharges, as well as impacts to marine life, will be important during the decommissioning period and site clean-up.

Even if EPA were to outright deny Entergy's permit renewal application, there is little hope that all pollutants entering Cape Cod Bay will stop or that all harms to marine life will end. However, by engaging in the process, submitting comments, and participating in the hearing, we can at least advocate for a permit that has some genuine protections for marine life and water quality. For example, we can request the most stringent limits for pollutants entering Cape Cod Bay, the most comprehensive biological monitoring activities, and stricter enforcement of the permit that holds Entergy accountable for any violations so that impacts to Cape Cod Bay can be minimized.

It is in all of our interest to see that the highest standards of the Clean Water Act apply to Pilgrim's operations. Visit capecodbaywatch.org for more information and to view the draft permit.

Karen Vale-Vasilev manages Jones River Watershed Association's Cape Cod Bay Watch program. JRWA has its offices on the banks of the river in Kingston, eight miles from Pilgrim.