



OF NUCLEAR INTEREST: Weigh in on the future of Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station

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By Heather M. Lightner

On Nov. 28, Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station will begin the last of three special inspections by a team of 20 experts from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The inspections will take place from Nov. 28 to Dec. 9, and then again from Jan. 9 to 13. Mechanical systems and worker performance will be examined.

Pilgrim's poor performance is well known. In September 2015, the NRC downgraded Pilgrim's performance rating and placed the plant in a "Column IV" category, or "one step from forced shutdown," and among the three worst performing reactors in the U.S. The approaching inspection is part of the increased NRC oversight caused by Pilgrim's downgrade.

Mechanical mishaps at the 44-year-old plant have made frequent headlines in papers on the South Shore and beyond. In 2016 alone, there have been 13 mechanical failures, problems associated with too-warm ocean water, and falsified reporting by employees.

Entergy, the company that owns Pilgrim, announced last year that it would be permanently powering down by May 31, was some speculation that Pilgrim might close sooner than the expected shutdown date. In April, those

rumors were squelched when Entergy announced that Pilgrim would be refueling its reactor in the spring of 2017, nixing any hope of an earlier shutdown – barring some unforeseen or perhaps catastrophic event.

Despite Entergy's May 31, 2019, projected shutdown date the question still remains – should Pilgrim shut down sooner vs. later?

Data gathered during the upcoming inspection will be used by the NRC to decide whether additional regulatory actions need to be put in place or if continued operation of the reactor poses an unacceptable margin of safety or security. The inspection is aimed at providing an assessment of the risks and issues facing Pilgrim. The NRC will assess the plant's safety culture and whether programs and processes are adequate in identifying, evaluating, and correcting performance issues. Inspectors will be focused on identifying the factors involved with Pilgrim's performance problems.

Longstanding doubts about the NRC's ability to be objective in its evaluation of Pilgrim prompted Pilgrim Watch Director and Duxbury resident Mary Lampert to send a request last month to the NRC's Northeast director, William Dean. Lampert asked that an independent expert with specific knowledge of boiling water reactors accompany the NRC inspection team in its evaluation of Pilgrim and report findings to the public. She also suggested that the expert be chosen by the region's congressional delegation, which includes Sens. Edward Markey and Elizabeth Warren and Rep. William Keating, and that Governor Baker could negotiate the appointment.

The request is not unheard of. Ohio was granted permission to have specially selected representatives accompany federal inspectors at the Davis-Besse nuclear plant in Oak Harbor. However, the special representatives at Davis-Besse were bound by a confidentiality agreement and were only allowed to discuss their observations with NRC inspectors, not the general public. At the time this piece was written, no independent expert had been appointed to Pilgrim's inspection team.

The newly formed Nuclear Decommissioning Advisory Panel (formed by the state Legislature) will likely address whether Pilgrim should power down prior to May 31, 2019, however, the decision is one that the public should also weigh in on.

Last month The Institute for Nuclear Host Communities (INHC) – a planning and community development firm associated with the University of Massachusetts – presented the Plymouth Board of Selectmen with general recommendations as Pilgrim moves toward closure. The recommendations included the formation of a citizens’ advisory panel (CAP). However, the purview of the panel and constitution of this group is unknown at this time. The INHC report suggested that the CAP be comprised of members from state departments including the Department of Public Health, the Department of Public Utilities, and the attorney general’s office. Will area residents have a seat at the CAP table and a say in Pilgrim’s decommissioning?

Residents all over the commonwealth carry the responsibility of educating themselves about Pilgrim – the risks associated with ongoing operations, and the complex and difficult decisions to follow in the coming years: decommissioning, cleanup, and the issue of long-term storage of high-level nuclear waste in America’s Hometown.

Heather M. Lightner is a registered nurse and a Plymouth resident. She is president of Concerned Neighbors of Pilgrim, a local grassroots group focused on safer storage of spent nuclear fuel, which works closely with Cape Cod Bay Watch. She is also a former member of the Plymouth Nuclear Matters Committee.