



NRC cites Pilgrim for four violations

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PLYMOUTH — Less than two weeks from today, 20 inspectors from around the country will descend on Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station to conduct a sweeping inspection of all its systems.

If a quarterly report released Monday on recent performance is an indication, Entergy, Pilgrim's owner-operator, may be in for a rough ride.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission cited four findings of concern, ranging from outdated electrical relays to broken radiation monitoring systems, in the 44-page document.

Karen Vale, program director of Cape Cod Bay Watch, said the situation at Pilgrim is of great concern. "All of these seemingly minor issues are indications of aging and failing plant," Vale said. "The NRC should not allow refueling in the spring and require shutdown before the 2019 deadline."

On four occasions, various systems designed to ensure radiation levels to remain safe, weren't functioning, said Neil Sheehan, spokesman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. "The sub-systems monitor radiation levels in different parts of the plant, including the stacks where they have controlled radiation releases."

The infraction was categorized as “low safety significance” because it did not result in the public receiving a radiation dose higher than what is allowed under regulations. The inspectors noted in the report, however, that the violation was once again related to problem identification and resolution — something the plant has been repeatedly cited for.

The violation list included an infraction related to the seismic testing of an emergency diesel generator. While the generator functioned satisfactorily during testing, those conducting the test left the door to the cabinet housing relays from the generator to emergency cooling systems open. “While it’s a low probability problem, nevertheless in a seismic event, the cabinet door could be knocked off with the attached relays,” Sheehan said. “Then the power wouldn’t get to the safety systems.”

The final two infractions were related to six electrical relays that are part of the isolation valve system designed to stop radiation from leaking in an emergency. The relays were meant to be replaced every 10 years. Five were 31 years old and the final one was 17 years old, Sheehan said.

Related to the relays was Pilgrim’s failure to perform a timely evaluation of the valves. It took Entergy 74 days to figure out what the problem was.

Entergy spokesman Patrick O’Brien said the events have often already been resolved by plant operators when the reports are released. “The findings were entered into our formal corrective action program to ensure resolution and to preclude recurrence,” O’Brien wrote in an email. “We remain committed to safe and reliable operations and we will do everything to meet and/or exceed regulatory requirements through shutdown in 2019.”

Entergy is already preparing for some needed replacement of fuel rods in the reactor, which will take place this spring. Five new steel-lined cement casks have been loaded with radioactive spent fuel rods from the pool in Pilgrim’s reactor building, making room for the rods being removed from the reactor. O’Brien said 340 spent fuel assemblies went into the casks, leaving 2,822 in the pool.

Pilgrim critic Diane Turco, co-founder of the Cape Downwinders, expressed frustration over the way federal regulators handle identified infractions such as those in the quarterly report. “Bad operation of Pilgrim will continue because

there are no consequences to Entergy for poor performance,” Turco said.

Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station is rated by the NRC as one of the three worst performers in the country.

Meanwhile the commission has agreed to a request from Mary Lampert, co-founder of Pilgrim Watch, to allow an independent observer to accompany inspectors during the two-week scrutiny of plant operations set to begin Nov. 23.

Federal officials said Gov. Charlie Baker can appoint the observer. Lampert has written to the governor, providing her own suggestion for the slot — David Lochbaum, an engineer and director of the Nuclear Safety Project for the Union of Concerned Scientists. Lochbaum was employed at the Browns Ferry nuclear plant and at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

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