

Bizzard Elevates Pilgrim Risk to Public Safety

Christine Legere of the Cape Cod Times reported that a series of storm related problems caused a shutdown of Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station at 4 a.m. on January 27th. The power station requires an uninterrupted supply of external power from offsite to operate and produce more power, which is then available to the power grid. This incoming electrical supply is also critical for cooling the water in the spent fuel pool where the highly radioactive hot spent fuel rods are stored atop the facility. A fire in the spent fuel pool could not be put out and would be an environmental and economic disaster for Massachusetts.

The plant had powered down to 80% in anticipation of the storm. However, first one and then a second 345 kilovolt line supplying offsite power went down, and plant operators further reduced power. The plant then switched to using onsite generators. Plymouth fire chief Ed Bradley reported in the Cape Cod Times that during the power down transmission lines delivering power out of the station froze triggering an automatic shutdown. After a shutdown the plant must be monitored closely to insure the nuclear reactor is cooling down properly.

Due to an unprecedented series of shutdowns in 2013-2014 Pilgrim was ranked among the 9 worst performing nuclear power stations in the country. It is currently on probation for safety with federal inspectors. Anything that interrupts power input to the Pilgrim power station is dangerous. It can be as simple as a blizzard related power failure or a corroded electrical line.

In Fukushima Japan on March 11th 2011, it was an earthquake followed by a tsunami, which washed the backup generators out of commission. As a result the reactors could not cool down, nor could the spent hot fuel rods be kept in cool water. As the rods overheated they gave off hydrogen gas that built up inside the unvented reactor domes causing all four reactors to explode over a period of three days. Pilgrim has the same reactor model as the four in Fukushima that exploded.

As a result of lessons learned in Fukushima, The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has required all nuclear power plants to come up with an additional backup flex plan to insure safe plant operation. At a recent DEP hearing in Plymouth, Pilgrim rolled out their flex plan. It involves getting a pump out to a mooring in the Bay in an unspecified manner. Then using a pump and hose device to bring water out of Cape Cod Bay to the overheating reactor and fuel pool. It is to be operated by plant personnel and local firefighters. How feasible do you think that would have been as the Bay churned during the blizzard? Do you think it is reasonable to expect local volunteer firefighters or plant personnel to tackle such a disaster? Needless to say it is a flawed and ridiculous plan. This aged plant continues to threaten public safety and health of the Bay. It should be decommissioned.

Maureen Burgess