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Pilgrim's nuclear waste to be moved to higher ground

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The Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station sits on the coast of Plymouth. Entergy Corp. announced plans to move nuclear waste to a higher elevation on the property, a decision welcomed by activists. [Merrily Cassidy/Cape Cod Times file]

By [Christine Legere](#)

Posted Oct 26, 2018 at 7:00 PMUpdated Oct 27, 2018 at 11:59 AM

Decision by Entergy Corp. is welcome news for Pilgrim activists.

PLYMOUTH — Radioactive waste produced during Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station's 46 years of operation will be stored 75 feet above mean sea level and 700 feet from the shore of Cape Cod Bay once the reactor permanently shuts down in June.

The announcement at Wednesday's meeting of the Nuclear Decommissioning Citizens Advisory Panel was welcome news, particularly in light of rising seas.

Entergy Corp. built Pilgrim's first spent fuel storage pad, where 17 fuel-filled dry casks now sit, just 200 feet from shore and 25 feet above mean sea level.

Plant watchdogs pushed Entergy, the plant's owner and operator, to find a spot with better elevation and distance from the coast but were skeptical it would happen.

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“I was surprised,” said Mary Lampert, president of Pilgrim Watch. “I fully expected they would leave the location where it was. The good news is, it will be as it should properly be: at a higher elevation.”

Entergy plans to relocate the dry casks on the current pad to the new location. Ultimately, 61 massive casks storing 4,100 spent fuel assemblies will sit there.

Three spots were considered: the current location, one near the plant’s switchyard and the upper parking lot on Rocky Hill Road.

The study considered a variety of factors, including capacity and layout, interference with above-ground and underground utilities, regulatory requirements, geological and engineering design issues, security requirements, radiological dose impacts for onsite workers and the public, and interference with the decommissioning process.

The parking lot site was selected.

“Our next step will be to apply for the required permits and commence construction before the plant ceases operation no later than June 1, 2019,” Entergy spokesman Patrick O’Brien wrote in a statement.

Neil Sheehan, spokesman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said no separate federal approval is needed for a new spent fuel storage installation.

“However, we would inspect the construction of the dry cask storage pad, the cask transfer path, actual moves of fuel and any security implications of the new location,” Sheehan wrote.

Entergy estimated the transfer of all the spent fuel to dry casks will be complete in 2021. O’Brien would not provide a cost figure for the job.

Holtec International, a company known for dealing with spent-fuel issues, plans to purchase Pilgrim once it closes. Any requirements placed on Entergy would shift to Holtec with the license transfer, according to Sheehan.

Sean Mullin, chairman of the Nuclear Decommissioning Citizens Advisory Panel, said he was “very pleased” with Entergy’s announcement to store the fuel at a higher location.

“While I commend Entergy for this decision, I believe they really had no choice because the engineering, environmental and decommissioning facts dictated its location,” Mullin wrote in an email.

Mullin said the radioactive spent fuel has to be stored at reactor sites because of the failure of the federal government to find a permanent storage location.

“Plymouth will still be a host to a nuclear waste site for the foreseeable future,” Mullin wrote. “We must continue to force the federal government to live up to its contract and responsibilities.”

One longtime plant critic commented that “altruism is not (Entergy’s) game.”

“Safety activists have been calling for the waste to be placed away from the shore for years, even before the first cask was filled,” wrote Diane Turco, president of the Cape Downwinders. “This move was purely a business decision that coincidentally involves a higher elevation.”

More than an improved elevation is needed to ensure public safety, Turco said.

The casks “should be placed in berms or a reinforced building with real time radiation/heat monitors inside a security-tight, isolated area.”

U.S. Sen. Edward Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat and member of the Senate Environmental and Public Works Committee, issued a statement following Entergy’s announcement of the storage pad location: “I have long called for Pilgrim to abandon its dangerous plan to keep nuclear waste directly next to seas rising as a result of climate change, and this decision reflects the reality of our times.”

“Rising seas, warmer waters and stronger storms are the new normal, and the NRC needs to take them into account when ensuring the safety of Pilgrim and all nuclear power plants.”

—*Follow Christine Legere on Twitter: [@ChrisLegereCCT](#).*