

No Escape From The Cape If Pilgrim Blows

Futaba, a town of roughly 7,000 in Fukushima prefecture, Japan, was, like Plymouth, thrilled when a nuclear power complex known as Fukushima Daiichi was built. It brought jobs and income to the town. As in Plymouth, a new library was built. The town grew and prospered and the people were happy.

The plant was licensed for 40 years. In February of 2011 it was licensed for an additional 10 years. Less than one month later, on March 11, 2011, an earthquake struck, followed by a tsunami. The plant was severely damaged and three of the six reactors experienced meltdowns.

Many fled the town ahead of the tsunami. TEPCO, the operator of Fukushima, attempted to downplay the scenario by lying to Japan's Prime Minister Naoto Kan. He was not told of the magnitude of the damage. Thus many residents were exposed to unsafe levels of radiation. Today, Futaba's residents are still displaced in towns across Japan, unable to return to their homes.

The people of Futaba were evacuated. They were given no time to prepare. Cattle were abandoned in their barns to die slow painful deaths. Belongings, including treasured photographs, were left behind in the rush to escape. The town government was relocated. It is run from afar by the current mayor, who took part in the painful decision to allow the town, now uninhabitable, to serve as the interim site for the disposal of contaminated soil and debris.

Plymouth today is a mirror image of Futaba before the meltdowns. The residents are happy with the jobs and income provided by Entergy, the owner of the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station. As in Futaba, they also enjoy a library built with income from the plant's owner. And as the residents of Futaba did, they feel safe and secure in the shadow of the plant.

Pilgrim, like the reactors at Fukushima, is a GE Mark 1 boiling water reactor. The containment vessel is too small to contain the hydrogen explosion that precedes a meltdown. The result in Japan was three core meltdowns and the release of a massive plume of radiation.

It was neither the earthquake nor the tsunami that caused the meltdowns at Fukushima; it was the loss of off-site power. This is a scene that could be replicated at Pilgrim today. It could happen during a severe storm, a failure of the electrical grid, an outside attack on the reactor, or a solar storm that could affect Earth's magnetic field and shut down the grid.

We on Cape Cod face the same danger as the residents of Futaba. We, without any of the benefits towns closer to the reactor receive, are at risk of becoming a nuclear wasteland. Like those who lived near Fukushima, we would be monitored for thyroid cancer to which our children would be especially vulnerable. Dressed in hazmat suits, we would be bused in now and then to see what remained of our lives. We most likely would be unable to retrieve the keepsakes containing our memories. They would have become contaminated. Our livelihoods would be lost. For many whose greatest assets are their homes, there is no insurance coverage in the event of a nuclear accident.

This is the price imposed upon us by a corporate giant whose only contribution to us is free potassium iodide pills to partially protect our thyroids while our bodies incubate future cancers in bones, organs, blood and tissues. The only real protection is the permanent closing of Entergy's aging nuclear plant and the removal of the spent fuel assemblies to dry cask storage.

Remember, if an evacuation is ordered, there is no escape from the Cape.