Sen. Markey: ‘It’s possible they don’t know what they’re doing’

Company Plans to Dump Radioactive Water from Pilgrim Reactor Into Cape Cod Bay

By Linda Pentz Gunter

At the conclusion of a close to four-hour public “field hearing” held in the community of Plymouth, Massachusetts on May 6, 2022, Senator Ed Markey, D-MA, pulled no punches. The Senate hearing invited a number of witnesses to testify on “Issues Facing Communities with Decommissioning Nuclear Plants,” with this session specifically focused on the nearby Pilgrim nuclear reactor, which closed in 2019. As part of the decommissioning process, Holtec International, the company that purchased the Pilgrim nuclear reactor from previous owner, Entergy, is preparing to dump a million gallons of radioactive water from the site into Cape Cod Bay as part of its decommissioning activities.

As the hearing drew to a close, Markey questioned Holtec’s competency and the leniency of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), the federal regulator ostensibly tasked with protecting public health and safety.

“It’s possible these problems may be more a reflection of its inexperience, and not arrogance,” Markey said of Holtec. “That they don’t know what they are doing.” A proposed NRC rule-making is in the works that would “update” (read “weaken”) federal decommissioning regulations for the nuclear industry.

“The commission’s proposed decommissioning rule shows it to be a captive agency,” said Markey, one that “shows no interest in engaging the public, which would provide even a semblance of accountability.”

Referring to the NRC’s failure to stop Holtec from looting its own taxpayer-funded decommissioning funds for company profit, Markey added that “without a stronger regulator, I fear that the only thing that will be emptier than the decommissioning trust fund will be the public’s trust in our government.”

Markey serves on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee and is chair of its Subcommittee on Clean Air, Climate, and Nuclear Safety.

John Lubinski, director of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s Office of Nuclear Material Safety and Safeguards, and Holtec International founder, president and CEO Kris Singh, were the key witnesses in Mark’s crosshairs at the hearing.

U.S. Representative Bill Keating, a Massachusetts Democrat whose district includes Plymouth where the Pilgrim reactor is located, joined Senator Markey in questioning the witness panel.

With the license now transferred from Entergy to Holtec, the New Jersey-based company has begun to decommision Pilgrim, dismantling and disposing of the reactor bulk and “cleaning up” the radioactive site.

The decommissioning work includes draining the “spent fuel” pool that sits atop the reactor building and that is presently filled with a million gallons of radioactive water. The water was used to cool and shield hundreds of tons of extremely hot high-level [radioactive] waste (the used irradiated fuel) for the past fifty years.

Any decision-making about the fate of a decommissioned reactor such as Pilgrim, said Markey, should include the meaningful participation of all impacted communities. Instead, he saw decision-making being left solely in the hands of Holtec, the apparent preference of the NRC and its current regulations, together with the agency’s decidedly “hands-off” oversight.

Alternatives to ocean dumping

Both Lubinski and Singh agreed during the hearing that there were alternative ways of dealing with the radioactive water that did not involve directly dumping it into Cape Cod Bay. These would include evaporating the contaminated water into the atmosphere or shipping it off-site by truck or rail to another community.

But these “solutions” are of course far from such, and involve transport risks and environmental justice issues as well.

Get in Line: Investigate U.S. Atrocities First

By John LaForge

The global outpouring of legitimate, agonized grief for civilian victims of Russia’s illegal war on Ukraine has brought countless calls for war crimes charges against the perpetrators. Before Russia’s criminal outrages are taken to the International Criminal Court, there are scores of alleged U.S. atrocities that must be investigated.

The U.S. military has a long record of apparently criminal conduct committed during its military assaults and unprovoked wars of aggression or occupation in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Pakistan, Yugoslavia, Somalia, and elsewhere. Like Russia in Ukraine, U.S. crimes include bombing hospitals, desecrating corpses, torturing and executing prisoners, using banned cluster bombs, and willfully attacking civilians and civilian objects.

But unlike today’s wall-to-wall news coverage of Russia’s every move in Ukraine, the U.S. media mostly withdrew from and stopped reporting on U.S. military occupations as the wars dragged on, and generally chose not to present many photos or film of either U.S. war dead or alleged U.S. crimes. Like news censorship inside Russia, the U.S. media’s blind eye helped maintain public support for U.S. wars-of-choice. Generalized calls to “support our troops” overwhelmed most reports of unlawful, excessive, or criminal acts by officers or soldiers. Eddie Gallagher, the Navy SEAL platoon chief who was convicted of posing for a photo with the corpse of the 17-year-old detainee who other SEALs testified Gallagher had stabbed to death, was freed from his sentence by Donald Trump.

Some of the most notorious and well-documented U.S. war crimes have involved torturing prisoners. “It is indisputable that the United States engaged in the practice of torture,” concluded a panel of experts for the Constitution Project in 2013. The group’s 577-page report found that President George W. Bush and other administration officials bore responsibility for the crimes. (“U.S. Practiced Torture After 9/11, Nonpartisan Review Concludes,” New York Times, April 16, 2013)

Hardly less criminal, on Feb. 12, 2010, in an atrocity kept secret for a month, U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan killed a teenage girl, a pregnant mother of 10, a pregnant mother of six, a police officer, and his brother, and were accused of trying to cover up the killings by digging bullets out of the victims’ bodies, washing the wounds with alcohol, and lying to superior officers. (“U.S. Admits Role in February Killing of Afghan Women,” New York Times, Apr. 4, 2010)


During the war in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, U.S. pilots deliberately bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade May 7, 1999, using five GPS-guided bombs. President Bill Clinton, CIA Director George Tenet, and Defense Secretary William Cohen all claimed it was a mistake. (“NATO bombed