More Issues Unearthed at Nuke Plant

JOSH FUNK, Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Several new problems have been found at a Nebraska power plant that suffered flood damage earlier this year, federal regulators said Tuesday, so inspectors will be watching the plant north of Omaha even more closely as repairs from flooding are made.

The tougher oversight for the Omaha Public Power District plant in Fort Calhoun will likely further delay its restart from early next year until sometime in the spring as it makes repairs from the summer flooding. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission said none of the new issues represents a public safety threat, but the growing number of problems, combined with the prolonged shutdown, requires more scrutiny.

Fort Calhoun has been shut down since April, when it was being refueled. Flooding along the Missouri River then forced it to remain closed as floodwaters surrounded the plant.

NRC spokesman Victor Dricks told The Associated Press that the new problems at the plant include deficiencies in the Omaha Public Power District's emergency response and either a design or installation flaw that contributed to a fire in June. Inspectors also found flaws in the way the utility's analysis of how the plant would withstand different accident conditions such as earthquakes, tornadoes or loss of coolant.

The plant was already facing extra oversight because of the failure of a key electrical part during a test in 2010 and deficiencies in flood planning that were also found last year. Fort Calhoun might not be receiving so much attention if it hadn't had the other recent regulatory problems.

"In light of all that, the senior managers of the NRC are going to increase oversight at Fort Calhoun even further," Dricks said.

Utility officials began looking for ways to improve Fort Calhoun's operations earlier this year after the first couple of regulatory concerns were identified. The utility has submitted a detailed improvement plan to the NRC that regulators approved. The utility's chief nuclear officer, Dave Bannister, has acknowledged the performance problems at Fort Calhoun and promised to improve.

Utility officials say they are committed to doing whatever it takes to repair Fort Calhoun.

"OPPD has and will continue to aggressively and thoroughly address these issues until they are resolved," said utility President and CEO W. Gary Gates. "We are committed to returning Fort Calhoun Station to its normal high-performing plant status as soon as possible."

David Lochbaum, nuclear safety director at the advocacy group Union of Concerned Scientists, said he could think of only a handful of times when the NRC has used this inspection approach, but that's partly because the nation's 65 nuclear power plants are rarely shut down as long as Fort Calhoun has been. He said many of the regulations the NRC uses to measure how well a nuclear plant is operating are based on things that happen while it is running.

Lochbaum praised the way the NRC is handling the situation.

"The good news is the NRC is doing its job," said Lochbaum, a former nuclear plant engineer.

At the height of the summer flooding, the Missouri River rose about 2 feet above the elevation of the base of the plant. The utility erected a network of barriers and set up an assortment of pumps to help protect its buildings. The plant remained dry inside, and officials said Fort Calhoun could withstand flooding up to 7 or 8 feet higher.

Two of the new violations are related to a small fire at Fort Calhoun that briefly knocked out the cooling system for used fuel in June. Temperatures at the plant never exceeded safe levels and power was quickly restored.

The utility declared an alert when the fire happened, but Dricks said it failed to notify state emergency response officials within 15 minutes, as required. NRC inspectors also determined that the part that caused the fire was either designed incorrectly or installed wrong.

Utility officials said last month that Fort Calhoun might resume generating electricity as early as January, but the additional inspections announced Tuesday will likely delay that a couple of months.

Before Tuesday's announcement, Fort Calhoun was one of only two nuclear power plants in the nation at level four of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's oversight system. This new move will put Fort Calhoun in a special category for plants that are shut down where regulators will have broad authority to conduct inspections.

Online: Nuclear Regulatory Commission: www.nrc.gov *[1]*

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