

Much Work Remains at Idle Nuclear Plant

JOSH FUNK, Associated Press

BLAIR, Neb. (AP) — Federal regulators said Wednesday it's unlikely the Fort Calhoun nuclear power plant will restart before fall because of the extensive inspections and repairs needed.

Officials from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Omaha Public Power District met in Blair, a few miles from the plant that's about 20 miles north of Omaha. The meeting is part of the strict oversight regulators have imposed on Fort Calhoun because of problems at the plant.

The NRC's Troy Pruett said he expects the agency will be conducting detailed inspections at Fort Calhoun through the summer. After that, NRC officials will review the situation before deciding whether the plant is ready to restart safely.

"I've got a summer's worth of inspections to be done," Pruett said.

OPPD Chief Nuclear Officer Dave Bannister said the utility knows there is more work to do to get Fort Calhoun ready to restart.

"We clearly understand our need to improve our performance," Bannister said.

Fort Calhoun has been shut down since last April when OPPD began performing routine refueling maintenance. The plant remained closed last summer because floodwaters surrounded the plant for months amid massive flooding along the Missouri River.

Regulators are watching Fort Calhoun closely because it has been closed so long and because several problems were found at the plant over the past couple years unrelated to last summer's flooding.

OPPD officials faced several pointed questions from people in the audience who are concerned about the plant. Jane Heinrich said she wants to know what the utility will do to regain her trust and the trust of everyone else who lives in Blair.

"It's unsettling to live just a few miles from the plant," Heinrich said.

Bannister said his family also lives close to the plant, and he is working hard to make sure it is well run.

"The safety of the plant is first and foremost to me," Bannister said.

OPPD hired a new plant manager for Fort Calhoun from Exelon, which is the largest U.S. operator of nuclear power plants. Mike Prospero started in February.

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Prospero said Fort Calhoun is ready to handle any flooding that might come this spring and summer along with Missouri River. Most of the damage from last year's flooding has been repaired, and OPPD's flood plans have been updated to reflect the lessons.

Utility officials said earlier this year that they expected to be able to restart Fort Calhoun sometime this spring. Now the restart date is unknown because the NRC will have to sign off on all the repairs and changes OPPD makes to Fort Calhoun before it can restart.

The problems at the plant don't represent a public safety threat, according to regulators and utility officials, but additional scrutiny is required because of them.

The operational problems that regulators have found include a fire last spring that briefly knocked out power to the cooling system for used fuel. That fire started in an electrical breaker that had been replaced about 18 months earlier.

During the fire, smoke and soot spread into Fort Calhoun's backup electrical system and knocked that out as well.

The NRC said OPPD officials were also too slow to notify state emergency response officials about the fire when it happened.

Regulators also found flaws in the utility's analysis of how the plant would withstand different accident conditions such as earthquakes, tornadoes or loss of coolant.

A key electrical part failed during a 2010 test at Fort Calhoun. That same year the NRC identified deficiencies in flood planning at the plant.

Recently, OPPD officials have had problems with the sirens Fort Calhoun uses to warn area residents about problems. The utility said it also has backup notification plans.

The NRC will determine whether the siren problems should also be considered a safety issue.

Online: NRC page on Fort Calhoun: <http://1.usa.gov/GBq2TF> [1]

Omaha Public Power District: www.oppd.com [2]

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