

# Regulators Questioned on Nuke Plant's Safety

JOSH FUNK, Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Federal regulators said Thursday there have no solid timeline to reopen the idled Fort Calhoun nuclear plant and tried to reassure local residents that they were closely watching the facility.

Several dozen people attended the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's open house in downtown Omaha, about 20 miles south of the plant. The meeting was part of the strict oversight regulators have imposed on Fort Calhoun because of problems at the plant, which has been offline since April 2011.

Omaha Public Power District officials said they hoped to restart Fort Calhoun in September but would adjust the timeline as needed if any additional issues are found. Initially shut down for maintenance, the plant was forced to stay closed because of flooding along the Missouri River and several safety violations.

Utility CEO Gary Gates said clear progress is being made on all fronts at the plant.

"We're executing the plan and moving down the path toward restarting," he said.

Regulators emphasized they didn't have a set timeline for restarting Fort Calhoun.

"The NRC is not predicting a timeline," said Jeff Clark, the regulatory agency's branch chief who has overseen Fort Calhoun's inspections since 2007.

Regulators are watching Fort Calhoun closely because of the problems and the long shutdown.

The violations found at Fort Calhoun include a small electrical fire last June, the failure of a key electrical part during a 2010 test and deficiencies in flood planning that were discovered a year before last summer's extended flooding along the Missouri River.

But OPPD and NRC officials say Fort Calhoun's problems never represented a threat to public safety.

During Thursday's meeting, Clark and the top inspector at Fort Calhoun, John Kirkland, were at times surrounded by a half dozen people concerned about the plant.

Mike Ryan, who lives in Omaha and is against nuclear plants, peppered Kirkland with questions about the possible lingering effects of last year's flooding and various violations at Fort Calhoun. Ryan said some of his questions about how the flooding might have affected the soil under the facility couldn't be answered because inspections are still being done at the plant.

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"I think some of the answers are still up in the air," Ryan said.

John Atkeison, the Nebraska Wildlife Federation's director of energy policy, said he appreciated the chance to ask NRC officials questions but thought they sounded like engineers trying to explain a technical problem. Atkeison said he thinks human issues are a bigger part of the problem at Fort Calhoun.

"The human side — the cultural side — seems to be the driving negative force here," Atkeison said.

Charles Ostdiek, with Nebraska's Green Party, said he was generally satisfied with the answers he got from the NRC, but he remains concerned about the safety of Fort Calhoun.

George Mills, who is a candidate for OPPD's board, said he doesn't think the utility has been forthcoming enough with the public about the situation at Fort Calhoun.

"I think they're on the right path now, but they're being more optimistic than the situation deserves," Mills said.

There is no chance that Fort Calhoun will be running again in time for this summer's period of peak electricity demand, so OPPD will again have to purchase electricity from other utilities.

Last year, OPPD spent about \$32 million to buy electricity from other sources while Fort Calhoun was closed. But utility officials say they don't expect rate increases this year because of Fort Calhoun's extended closure.

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

Omaha Public Power District: [www.oppd.com](http://www.oppd.com) [2]

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