Sierra Club Wants Nuke Plant to Lose License

JOSH FUNK,Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The Sierra Club of Iowa asked federal regulators Thursday to revoke the operating license of Nebraska's Fort Calhoun nuclear plant because of its history of safety violations.

The environmental group, which opposes nuclear power in general, filed a 10-page petition with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission listing a number of violations at the plant, located 20 miles north of Omaha, that date back to 1992.

The group says the Omaha Public Power District appears unable to operate Fort Calhoun safely. The plant has been offline since April 2011. It was initially shut down for refueling maintenance, but flooding along the Missouri River and several safety violations forced it to stay closed.

"Based on the evidence, there is no likelihood that OPPD will ever be able or willing to operate Fort Calhoun properly and safely," Wally Taylor wrote in the Sierra Club's petition.

Both OPPD and NRC officials have said Fort Calhoun's recent problems never represented a threat to public safety.

OPPD spokesman Jeff Hanson said Thursday the utility is confident in its plan to improve Fort Calhoun, which was developed with the help of industry experts. Hanson took issue with the Sierra Club's assessment.

"We disagree with their contention that the plant is unsafe and believe having a large power plant like Fort Calhoun that produces carbon-free electricity is an important part of our diverse generation portfolio," Hanson said.

David Lochbaum, nuclear safety director at the advocacy group Union of Concerned Scientists, said the NRC probably receives a petition similar to the one the Sierra Club submitted about once a month. Lochbaum's group, based in Massachusetts, has submitted at least half a dozen petitions regarding nuclear plants around the country.

Most of the petitions are denied, but he said the NRC may force a nuclear plant operator to make changes to address concerns raised by the petition.

"They are taken seriously by the agency," Lochbaum said.

NRC spokesman Victor Dricks said Thursday he wasn't sure if the petition had been received yet, but he said it would be reviewed.

The recent violations that have kept Fort Calhoun offline 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.

OPPD officials have said they hope to restart Fort Calhoun in September. But NRC officials have said there is no timeline for restart, and regulators won't let the plant resume generating electricity until they are convinced it is safe.

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