Ailing Reactor Prepares to Remove Fuel

MICHAEL R. BLOOD,Associated Press

SAN CLEMENTE, Calif. (AP) — The operator of the San Onofre nuclear power plant is preparing to empty the radioactive fuel from one of its twin reactors, a federal official said Monday, another sign the plant won't be operating at full capacity anytime soon, if ever.

Tons of fuel inside the disabled Unit 3 reactor will be moved into storage in mid-September, Nuclear Regulatory Commission inspector Gregory Warnick told The Associated Press on Monday.

The plant located between Los Angeles and San Diego has been shut down since January, after a break in a tube that carries radioactive water. Investigators later found unusual wear on scores of tubes inside the plant's four steam generators, and Southern California Edison has been trying for months to determine how to fix it.

Edison has previously said it's focusing on repairing the Unit 2 reactor, which had been taken offline earlier in January for maintenance, and that "the Unit 3 reactor will not be operating for some time."

Damage to the tubes in Unit 2 is less widespread, but there's no timetable for its possible restart.

Unit 3 "is clearly not the focus right now in terms of correcting the steam generator issues," said Warnick, the NRC's senior resident inspector at San Onofre. "Unit 3 is going to take more work."

Dave Lochbaum, director of the Union of Concerned Scientists' nuclear safety project, said placing the radioactive fuel in storage puts the reactor in a condition "requiring the least amount of safety equipment to be operable, and therefore the fewest number of tests and inspections to be performed."

Coming shortly after Edison announced plans to cut its workforce, "reducing the scope of required work at the jobsite is a good thing to do before discharging workers," Lochbaum said.

Edison spokeswoman Jennifer Manfre said in a statement that removing fuel from the unit "will best allow us to maintain the unit as testing, analysis and repair planning continue."

Traces of radiation escaped at the time of Unit 3's tube break, but officials said there was no danger to workers or neighbors. A three-month federal probe blamed a botched computer analysis for generator design flaws that ultimately resulted in excessive wear to alloy tubes.

About 7.4 million Californians live within 50 miles of San Onofre, which can power 1.4 million homes.

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