Activists Demand Shutdown of Ailing Nuke Plant

MICHAEL R. BLOOD,Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Environmentalists accused federal regulators of conducting a bogus review of a proposal to restart the damaged San Onofre nuclear power plant on the California coast, and nearby residents demanded the abandonment of the plan and the shutdown of the plant.

Just days after Southern California Edison asked the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for permission to repair and start the Unit 2 reactor, then run it at reduced power, the agency is facing pressure from groups critical of the nuclear power industry to initiate a review that could take months or even years to complete.

The NRC is "denying the public any meaningful voice" in the review to restart the plant, which has been shuttered since January, Friends of the Earth, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Committee to Bridge the Gap said in a joint statement Tuesday.

Their sentiments were echoed at a public meeting Tuesday of the NRC that drew a crowd of more than 800 people.

"We cannot be used as an experiment to see if there will be more radiation leaks or release," said Grace Van Thillo, a resident of nearby San Clemente and a panelist at the meeting, according to the Orange County Register.

Another San Clemente resident and activist, Gene Stone, opened the public comments with his opposition to the restoration.

"We stand for decommissioning this old nuclear plant as soon as possible, before ratepayers or taxpayers spend any more money to repair it," Stone said.

Some residents spoke in support of getting the plant operational again, including Ken Schultz of Laguna Niguel, a retired nuclear engineer who said he lived 20 miles (32 kilometers) downwind of San Onofre.

"I don't see these as serious safety issues, and I urge the NRC to get on with their review," Schultz said.

The NRC has promised a transparent, thorough review of the proposal, which focuses on how the utility will fix faulty steam generators installed during a $670 million overhaul.

"We don't experiment with safety," NRC Regional Administrator Elmo Collins told reporters Monday.

The environmental groups are pushing the federal agency to require Edison to seek

an amendment to its operating license to restart the plant, a process that could take up to two years.

In a March letter, federal regulators outlined a series of benchmarks Edison must reach to restart the plant, including determining the cause of vibration and friction that damaged scores of steam generator tubes, how it would be fixed and then monitored during operation.

Those requirements, however, did not involve amending the plant's operating license.

"This significant change rises to the level of a license amendment proceeding in which, by law, the public is entitled to participate," the groups said.

Collins said Monday it's an "open question" if the agency will require a license amendment.

Anti-nuclear activists have argued for months that restarting the plant, located between San Diego and Los Angeles, would invite catastrophe. About 7.4 million Californians live within 50 miles (80 kilometers) of San Onofre's twin domes.

Tests found some tubes were so badly corroded that they could fail and possibly release radiation, a stunning finding inside the nearly new equipment.

Edison's proposal calls for operating Unit 2 at up to 70 percent power for five months then shutting it down for inspections.

The future of the heavily damaged Unit 3 reactor is not clear.

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