NRC Chief: No Commitment on Hearing at Cal Nuke

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has not decided whether it will hold a public hearing on a plan to restart the troubled San Onofre nuclear power plant in California, the nation's top nuclear regulator said Tuesday.

NRC Chair Allison Macfarlane told reporters in Washington, D.C., that she is aware of strong public interest in California and among some members of Congress for a public hearing, but said agency officials still are working to determine the best way to inform the public. She called the situation at San Onofre complex.

"This is a constantly evolving situation," she said. "Every day brings a new surprise."

The Atomic Safety and Licensing Board, an independent arm of the agency, sided Monday with environmentalists who have called for detailed public hearings on Southern California Edison's restart proposal.

U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., said the board's decision established "a legal framework for a full public hearing before any final decision on the restart of the San Onofre nuclear power plant is made."

Macfarlane stopped short of saying whether a hearing is a requirement of Monday's decision.

"We are trying to devise ways to explain to the public what is going on here," she told reporters after a speech to the nuclear industry.

The plant between San Diego and Los Angeles hasn't produced electricity since January 2012, after a small radiation leak led to the discovery of unusual damage to hundreds of tubes that carry radioactive water.

Edison wants to run the Unit 2 reactor at no more than 70 percent power for five months, which it projects will stop damage to tubing in its steam generators.

In its ruling, the licensing board called Edison's restart plan an "experiment."

Macfarlane said with or without a public hearing, a decision on the restart plan will not be made until at least late June.

In a brief statement, Southern California Edison said it's evaluating the board's ruling.

The company noted it had separately submitted paperwork to change the seaside plant's operating rules to permit the single reactor to run at reduced power, down

from the now-required 100 percent. Parent company Edison International raised the possibility last month of retiring the plant if it can't get one reactor running later this year.

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