Regulators Discuss Future of Neb. Nuclear Plant

JOSH FUNK, Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The idle Fort Calhoun nuclear power plant is loaded with fuel for the first time in more than two years, and utility officials say it will operate safely if regulators allow it to restart.

Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials made it clear when they met Tuesday with the Omaha Public Power District that they haven't decided whether to allow the plant that sits on the Missouri River 20 miles north of Omaha to restart.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss how OPPD and the company it hired to run Fort Calhoun, Exelon Corp., would continue improving the plant if it gets permission to restart the plant, which has been idle since 2011.

Implementing a long-term plan to continue improving Fort Calhoun is among 14 items remaining on the restart checklist for Fort Calhoun. All of the items on the list must be completed and inspected before regulators will allow Fort Calhoun to resume operations.

The items remaining on the checklist include resolving several of the issues that prompted the extended shutdown, including shortcomings in flood planning, a small electrical fire in June 2011 and concerns about how workers responded to problems at the plant.

Massive flooding along the Missouri River in 2011 also contributed to the extended outage for Fort Calhoun.

Fort Calhoun plant manager Mike Prospero said the fuel was loaded into the core in late July, and utility officials expect to be ready to heat up the plant in late September without using nuclear power.

That will allow workers to inspect parts and test power-generating systems that haven't operated under a full load since Fort Calhoun shut down for maintenance in April 2011.

Michael Hay, one of the NRC officials overseeing Fort Calhoun, said it's clear that a lot of work has been done to improve the power plant. Regulators want to make sure that the physical plant and the people running it are ready to operate Fort Calhoun safely.

"There's a lot of evidence that the plant has really improved," Hay said.

One of the key questions now is whether OPPD and Exelon have learned enough about what went wrong at Fort Calhoun to keep it from happening again, Hay said.

OPPD officials say one of the key differences now is that Chicago-based Exelon has brought its expertise to Fort Calhoun. Exelon operates 17 nuclear reactors at 10 different power plants and has a safe track record.

Officials from both Exelon and OPPD told regulators Tuesday that adopting Exelon's procedures should help Fort Calhoun operate at a high level.

The utility has retrained plant workers on how to handle safety concerns, and officials say it is clear those lessons are being put into practice because the number of safety reports being submitted has soared.

Environmental groups in Nebraska and Iowa have called for regulators to keep Fort Calhoun closed because of concerns about its safety record and the condition of the plant.

NRC officials have said repeatedly that they won't allow Fort Calhoun to restart until they are confident it can operate safely.

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