Fort Calhoun Nuclear Plant Closer to Restarting

JOSH FUNK, Associated Press

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission provided an update on the plant Tuesday, stating that nearly three-quarters of the concerns keeping the Fort Calhoun nuclear plant offline have been resolved, but it's still not clear when it could restart. Fort Calhoun, which sits across from Iowa on the Missouri River about 20 miles north of Omaha, initially shut down in April 2011 for routine maintenance, but significant flooding, a small fire and a series of safety violations forced it to remain closed.

Omaha Public Power District and Exelon Corp., the company hired to run the plant, have been working to resolve the problems there and make sure it is safe. NRC spokeswoman Lara Uselding said Fort Calhoun has resolved about 70 percent of the items that must be dealt with before it can restart, and about 25 percent of the items are being reviewed. "The licensee is making progress and starting to understand what the NRC is looking for," Uselding said.

Regulators recently signed off on OPPD's flood preparations, resolving a concern the NRC raised a year before the historic 2011 floods along the Missouri River turned the nuclear plant into an island. The remaining concerns include determining whether the structural supports inside the building that houses the reactor are strong enough. An engineer OPPD hired said in 2012 they would not withstand extreme circumstances. One of the next steps for Fort Calhoun will be to test out several systems that are only used when the plant is running — which could reveal new issues that will have to be addressed.

Mike Ryan, a spokesman for environmental group Clean Nebraska, said Fort Calhoun should be shut down permanently because of ongoing safety concerns and the cost of repairs and operation. Ryan said he's particularly worried that the NRC may be overlooking concerns about what would happen if a dam upstream failed. "I think they're ignoring the whole flooding issue and dam failure issues," Ryan said. The NRC plans to review Fort Calhoun's flood preparations and how it would deal with a catastrophic flood before deciding whether it can restart, Uselding said.

Just this week, OPPD reported finding a new problem. The utility said Tuesday the epoxy coating on the floor of a room with steam pipes would not contain the water if there were a leak, so vital equipment could be damaged on the floor below.

OPPD and NRC officials have said they won't consider allowing Fort Calhoun to restart until they're confident it can operate safely. As part of its plans for the future, OPPD signed a 20-year contract with Exelon last year to have the Chicago-based company operate Fort Calhoun. OPPD has said Exelon was chosen because of its experience and safe track record operating 17 nuclear reactors at 10 different power plants.

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