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Comanche Peak gets a warning

Fire barriers used by many nuclear power plants failed to withstand fire during testing.

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FORT WORTH - Tests of fire barriers identical to those installed at Comanche Peak prompted sterner warnings this week to TU Electric and the owners of 74 other nuclear power plants that they will have to alter fire-retardant shields surrounding backup safety systems at the plants. Acting on tests commissioned by TU Electric, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission said it has found that Thermo-Lag 330 barriers fail to withstand fire during one- and three-hour tests regardless of the size of the barriers. The NRC staff also said that tests conducted by a TU Electric consulting laboratory this month and the National Institute of Standards and Technology "are indicative of the inability of the Thermo-Lag material itself to provide protection . . . depending on its configuration."

The bulletin was released as TU Electric drafted a \$500,000 plan to enhance the barriers at its Unit I and Unit II reactors near Glen Rose during a routine refueling shutdown this fall.

Yesterday, the NRC ordered the owners of 76 plants containing the barriers to install immediate 24-hour fire watches on the backup safety systems and report back to the regulatory agency within 30 days. TU Electric already has instituted the fire watches and has taken the lead among nuclear power plant owners trying to determine whether the St. Louis-manufactured barriers can be modified to meet existing regulations.

But the NRC and the utility said the recent tests do not support a call by watchdog groups in Washington, D.C., Fort Worth and other areas to force removal or replacement of the material.

"Our folks are willing to say after reviewing the tests that with proper installation and configuration that Thermo-Lag will preform its function," NRC spokesman Joe Gilliland said.

TU Electric spokesman Dick Ramsey said the utility plans to submit its own report and recommendations within 10 days.

"I don't think this really changes the indeterminate nature of it all," Ramsey said. "We probably are going to have some conclusions that will make it acceptable."

Citizens for Fair Utility Regulation of Fort Worth and the Washington, D.C.-based Nuclear Information and Resource Service have asked the NRC to force the shutdown of Comanche Peak Unit I and other plants and halt licensing efforts of Comanche Peak Unit II until the material is replaced.

The NRC's inspector general also has confirmed a continuing investigation into NRC staff members who initially approved use of the material in the early 1980s.

Yesterday's announcement prompted the Dallas-based Citizens Association for Sound Energy to enter the Thermo-Lag battle and call for a further investigation.

"One of the things we've been concerned about for some time is how did they qualify the material they used to start with," said CASE President Juanita Ellis. "There's nothing we've seen so far to show us that we want that material out there."

Correction: Nuclear Regulatory Commission Joe Gilliland is incorrectly identified as the source of a quotation in this article, saying that Thermo-Lag fire barriers at Comanche Peak nuclear power plant could meet federal test standards with proper configuration. The comment was made by Dick Ramsey, a spokesman for TU Electric.(9/3/92)