

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

1994-04-17

Section: NEWS

Edition: FINAL AM

Page: 1

Lab says it falsified data on fire retardant

Utilities across the nation used the phony certifications as proof to regulators that nuclear plants, including the Comanche Peak plant, could be shut down safely in an emergency.

Jackie Koszczuk Star-Telegram Writer - Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON - A private laboratory provided false test results for a fire retardant used in varying amounts in the Comanche Peak nuclear power plant and 77 other nuclear plants around the nation, according to federal court records.

The St. Louis-based company also provided blank letterhead stationery to the manufacturer of the material, which then used the stationery to write reports certifying the safety of the fire barrier material, according to a guilty plea in federal court by the president of the testing company, Allan M. Siegel of Industrial Testing Laboratories Inc. The phony certifications vouched that the material could slow the spread of fire and protect crucial electrical systems. Utilities across the nation used the certifications as proof to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission that their plants could be shut down safely in an emergency.

Industrial Testing Laboratories' admission confirms long-suspected problems with the testing of a fire barrier material called Thermolag. Nuclear watchdog organizations have called for its immediate removal from the nation's nuclear plants, but the NRC has approved more incremental solutions.

TU Electric spokesman Dave Fiorelli said the lab's tests prompted the utility to install the fire retardant in both units of its nuclear plant 45 miles southwest of Fort Worth. Comanche Peak, with both units operating as of last year, is the nation's newest operating nuclear plant. The two-unit South Texas Nuclear Plant near Houston also used Thermolag.

The Justice Department records show that Thermolag was used to a greater degree at Comanche Peak and three other plants nationwide than at any other plant - more than 10,000 feet of the product.

As problems with the testing of Thermolag became known within the industry in recent years, Fiorelli said, TU commissioned its own tests. An independent laboratory in San Antonio conducted the tests, which NRC staff monitored, he said.

Based on those results, the utility decided that the fire retardant will not have to be replaced and will work if additional layers are added around electrical conduits, which Thermolag is designed to protect.

"We are convinced that the material is a good fire barrier when it is properly installed in adequate amounts," Fiorelli said.

Other plants face more difficult and costly solutions - estimates are as much as \$500 million industrywide - because their plants are older.

While utilities search for ways to fix the problem, the NRC has allowed plants to use "fire watches," in which employees patrol the plants looking for signs of fire.

Frank Miraglia, NRC deputy director of nuclear reactor regulation, said yesterday, "Many licensees would not be in full compliance without fire watches."

The patrols, along with smoke alarms, sprinkler systems and regular fire brigade protections, provide "adequate fire protection" while a permanent solution is sought for the Thermolag problem, he said.

Siegel and ITL pleaded guilty late last week in federal district court in Baltimore to five counts of making false statements to the NRC, the Bechtel Corporation, which builds nuclear plants, and to four power companies.

Siegel is cooperating in a grand jury investigation of the widespread installation of Thermolag at U.S. nuclear power plants, according to the plea agreement, which was signed by Siegel and Lynne Battaglia, U.S. attorney for the Maryland district. Siegel could not be reached for comment yesterday.

According to the plea agreement:

For a nine-year period ending in 1991, Siegel and ITL supplied 30 false test reports verifying the fire endurance of Thermolag to Thermal Science Inc., the St. Louis-based manufacturer of Thermolag.

At the request of Thermal Science Inc., ITL employers provided signed and backdated work sheets indicating that they had witnessed tests of Thermolag, though they were not present for the tests, which were done at Thermal Science.

Also at the request of the manufacturer, Siegel "provided blank ITL stationery, which TSI used to prepare final versions of the test reports and letters."

A Thermal Science Inc. employee who declined to give his name said the firm will comment on its relationship with ITL tomorrow.

Based on the ITL reports, the fire retardant was installed at Comanche Peak and at other nuclear plants to protect important electrical cables needed to help shut down a plant in the case of a nuclear emergency.

The NRC began requiring the use of protective fire retardants after a 1975 fire at the Brown's Ferry nuclear plant in Alabama burned through two sets of cables, causing a dangerous temporary loss of control of the reactor.

Correction: CLARIFICATION: Industrial Laboratories of 3001 Cullen St., Fort Worth is not affiliated with a St. Louis-based company with a similar name, Industrial Testing Laboratories, Inc.(4/19/94)