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Oil leak shuts down Comanche Peak unit

Barry Shlachter Star-Telegram Writer

An oil leak on a transformer led TU Electric officials to temporarily shut down Unit 2 at the Comanche Peak nuclear power plant near Glen Rose, TU spokesman Franks Shants said yesterday.

Such transformers are not unique to nuclear facilities, the utility spokesman said. The unit, which was shut down Monday, should be back in operation by Tuesday, and the electricity shortfall during the near-peak period will be made up by other generating plants in TU's system, Shants said. The leak was discovered in the transformer's bushings.

"We're not surprised," said Lon Burnam, 41, a board member of Citizens for Fair Utility Regulation and a longtime critic of Comanche Peak. "It's typical of the maintenance and operation there."

But the most recent review by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, for the 12-month period that ended May 28, found the plant superior in engineering and good in operation and maintenance. Maintenance was considered excellent by the end of the review period.

The oil leak was not considered a major concern by the federal agency.

"They've got to clean it up," said Joe Gilliland, a commission spokesman. "It can be a fire hazard, but it's not a nuclear safety concern."

The temporary closure of the 1,150-megawatt unit represents less than 9 percent of TU's capacity, Shants said.

In June, Unit 2 was taken off line for three days after the discovery of a burned wire on the plant's main generator and a faulty governor on a backup diesel generator. It had been brought on line the week before, after being closed for scheduled maintenance in mid-April.

Meanwhile, the NRC is determining whether Comanche Peak should be fined over a welding problem, Gilliland said.

"We have sent them an inspection report, which said we were considering escalated enforcement action, which could be a fine," the commission spokesman said.

At issue is scrutiny of systems that can be affected by vibrations, he said. "The best welding in the world, if you don't brace them, eventually will fail. Metallurgists call it metal fatigue."

Jerry Lee, a TU spokesman, said the problem stems from a welding repair on the piping of the plant's safety containment spray system. "It was not a safety related issue or a health concern issue," Lee said. "Our initial repair did not fix the problem."