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Nuclear facility cited for incidents

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The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has cited the Comanche Peak nuclear power plant for repeated improper handling of low-level radioactive waste, its first significant safety violations in more than eight years.

Officials of TXU Energy, the plant's owner and operator, said the infractions posed no risk to employees or the public.

The violations will be discussed Wednesday at a 1 p.m. public meeting in Arlington between the NRC and TXU officials.

It is the first low- to moderate-level safety violation at either of Texas' two nuclear power plants since the NRC adopted a new system of ranking infractions two years ago.

The Comanche Peak plant near Glen Rose was last sanctioned in 1993 after radioactive water spilled in a containment area during refueling.

The plant was shut down at the time and no water escaped, but the company was fined \$50,000 by the NRC.

In the latest incidents, some clothing and maintenance equipment contaminated with radioactivity were found outside a controlled area at the plant, said Breck Henderson, an NRC spokesman in Arlington.

The NRC found 11 instances of violations between January 24, 2000 and May 24, 2001, he said. "The contaminated materials weren't dealt with properly," Henderson said.

Nuclear power plants must follow strict federal standards in cleaning and disposing of contaminated clothing and equipment, he said.

TXU officials said they hope to prove to the NRC that safety was not compromised at the plant, known as the Comanche Peak Steam Electric Station, in Somervell County about 50 miles southwest of Fort Worth.

"None of these materials was released from our controlled property. Everything remained on site so the public was not exposed to any risk," said Rand LaVonn, TXU spokesman.

The amount of radioactivity is so small that it is well below government safety standards, he said.

The incidents included a glove left in someone's pocket and a pair of pliers that ended up in a tool shed, LaVonn said. TXU believes there were only three incidents, he said.

"Corrective actions have already been taken to ensure that these things don't happen again," LaVonn said.

Henderson said the Comanche Peak plant has "a real good history of safe operation."

The NRC recently adopted a color-coded chart for classifying violations as green, white, yellow or red, in increasing order of concern.

The Comanche Peak violation is a "preliminary white finding" and could lead to enforcement action, Henderson said.

In the NRC's western region, which includes Texas and covers 21 reactors at 14 sites, the agency has found eight violations - one yellow and seven white - since April 2000, Henderson said.

The yellow violation was at a nuclear facility in Washington state that failed to maintain adequate emergency plans for evacuating the public working nearby. The white findings included citations for an inoperable pump and for not arranging work schedules to minimize radiation exposure.

None of those instances resulted in fines, he said.

"Any small deviation from regulations gets the color scheme," Henderson said.

But Paul Gunter, director of the reactor watchdog project at the Nuclear Information and Research Service in Washington, said the predominant color is "gray."

"This is a relaxation of enforcement," Gunter said. "The color coding leads to extensive arbitrations and drags on endlessly with the agency acting more as a negotiator than a regulator."

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PUBLIC MEETING

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission will hold a public meeting Wednesday in Arlington with TXU Energy officials to discuss safety violations at TXU's Comanche Peak nuclear power plant.

The meeting will be at 1 p.m. on the fourth floor at 611 Ryan Plaza Drive, on the north side of Interstate 30 near Lamar Boulevard between Cooper and Collins streets.

MAP(S): Map showing location of Comanche Peak Nuclear Plant