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Nuclear plant to get more scrutiny

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The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission will increase its oversight at the Comanche Peak nuclear power plant because of improper handling of low-level radioactive waste, federal officials said Friday.

Additional safety inspections will be made at the plant in the next year, said Ellis Merschoff, regional administrator for the NRC, the federal agency that oversees plant safety.

"There will be an inspection," Merschoff said. "It's a question of when."

Officials at TXU Energy, the plant's owner and operator, said the company is being unfairly punished for a vigilant safety program and will probably appeal the regulatory commission's ruling.

The company has fixed the problems, said TXU spokesman Rand LaVonn.

"Now the NRC is proposing to punish us for having the best equipment and doing the right thing," LaVonn said. "We have extra-sensitive equipment so we caught it."

The infractions, considered by the NRC to be low to moderate safety problems, posed no threat to the public, officials said. But they violated strict federal rules governing the cleaning and disposal of contaminated clothing and equipment at nuclear power plants, officials said. The Comanche Peak violations occurred between Jan. 24, 2000 and May 24, 2001.

The commission's decision comes one month after its meeting with TXU Energy over 11 incidents in which pliers, glove liners and other contaminated items were found outside the plant's most secure area.

The 11 cited violations were among 20 found at the plant between 1999 and 2001, the commission's records show.

"The levels of radioactivity are very, very low," Merschoff said. "The issue of concern was that there was an unmonitored pathway to the environment, and although nothing made it outside the fence, it could have."

However, LaVonn said Comanche Peak went "above and beyond the call" in detecting the very low levels of radiation and then took the initiative to report the incidents to the commission.

He said the commission's decision sends the wrong message to the nuclear power industry, and discourages plants from upgrading their monitoring capabilities.

But Merschoff said that extra eyes are needed to look at safety practices at the plant.

"We have looked at their immediate corrective actions and we agree they have solved the problem," he said. "The purpose of the additional inspection is to look at why the problem occurred, the root cause, and if those issues have been addressed."

Now, two NRC inspectors are regularly stationed at the plant, Merschoff said. Over the next year, an additional commission inspector, who is an expert in radiological controls, will check the TXU plant for up to one week, he said.

The NRC action marks the first significant safety problem at the plant, known as the Comanche Peak Steam Electric Station, in more than eight years, and is the first safety problem the

commission noted at either of Texas' two nuclear power plants since the agency adopted a new system of ranking infractions two years ago.

The plant, about 50 miles southwest of Fort Worth 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 commission fined the company \$50,000.

The power plant has since taken corrective measures, LaVonn said. There has been a review of procedures, additional training for supervisors and employees and a new, more intensive tracking of material entering and leaving the plant's controlled areas.

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MAP(S): Comanche Peak nuclear Plant