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TXU, inspectors to discuss Comanche reactor problems
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A reactor at the Comanche Peak nuclear power plant that was shut down in September because of leaking and corroded tubing is having a tough time getting going again, officials said.

The reactor -- which was shut down for 50 days to repair more than 660 corroded and cracked tubes and for refueling -- has been started and stopped twice since Nov. 15 and is under repair and out of service.

"The reactor should be back in operation in a number of days," said TXU spokesman David Beshear. "The bottom line is safety, and we have systems in place that work correctly."

TXU is scheduled to meet today at the plant with a Nuclear Regulatory Commission special inspection team that has investigated problems with the steam-generating tubes.

"This will be a discussion of the team's preliminary findings and a look at what the company has been doing to address the problem," said Ken Clark, NRC spokesman. Comanche Peak, near Glen Rose, about 50 miles southwest of Fort Worth, went on-line in 1990 with one reactor. It now has two.

The troubled reactor, Unit 1, resumed operation Nov. 15 but was shut down Nov. 23 because of a potential valve problem, TXU officials said.

The reactor was back in service two days later. But on Nov. 30, a blown fuse triggered a safety mechanism that caused a control rod to drop into the reactor's core, Beshear said.

The control rod is a safety measure that slows the nuclear reaction in the core.

On Dec. 3, the reactor was taken off-line again, this time to repair an electric coil. That's when plant workers found that the coil failure was caused by a leaky weld in a canopy seal at the control rod, Beshear said.

He said that the weld has been repaired and that other minor work is being done.

Bill Johnson, NRC branch chief responsible for overseeing reactor inspections at Comanche Peak and two other nuclear plants, said "such leaks are not uncommon" at the canopy seal by the control rod.

"It's not a major safety problem," Johnson said. "It's an operating problem."

None of the problems has posed a safety or public health risk, TXU and NRC officials said. Comanche Peak's second reactor, completed in 1993, remains unaffected and continues to operate.

In early December, Comanche Peak workers found deposits of boric acid crystals around the leak, a potential concern because a boric acid buildup was blamed for extensive corrosion in the top of the Davis-Besse nuclear reactor near Toledo, Ohio.

Similar corrosion was not found at Comanche peak, Johnson said.

But the leaking and cracked steam-generating tubes, the subject of today's meeting with the NRC, are a longstanding problem at plants that were built with Westinghouse-engineered pressurized water reactors.

The Westinghouse systems were installed in both commercial nuclear power plants in Texas, Comanche Peak and the South Texas Project.

The thin tubes are made of a stainless steel alloy called Inconel 600. They have cracked and leaked within 10 years at some plants designed to last 40 years, according to NRC records.

The tubes carry superheated, radioactive water from the reactor core to convert nonradioactive water into steam for electricity-generating turbines.

The tube problem has led to at least 14 lawsuits against Westinghouse, all of which have been settled out of court with most court documents sealed.

At least 19 steam-generating systems have been replaced at U.S. nuclear power plants for \$100 million to \$200 million per plant, records show. The South Texas project replaced its steam generators in the past two years.

TXU is "continuing to evaluate replacement" of its steam generators at Comanche Peak, Beshear said.

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