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Report issued on shutdown

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The failure to find a damaged steam tube before it leaked and caused a shutdown at Comanche Peak nuclear power plant had "potential safety significance," federal officials said in a report released Friday.

The report, by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, documents the agency's special inspection of the TXU power plant near Glen Rose after the ruptured pipe triggered a radiation monitor in September and forced the shutdown.

"The finding is greater than minor because it adversely affected the reactor safety barrier integrity," the report says.

NRC and company officials said the error, which occurred in spring 2001, did not cause a safety or public health risk. No radiation was released.

The NRC has not reached a final determination about the seriousness of the violation, but said that it would not issue a notice of violation at this time against TXU. The findings could change after further review, the report notes.

"It could lead to additional inspection and oversight," said Roger Hannah, NRC spokesman in Atlanta. "More serious safety issues can yield civil penalties."

It could take several weeks or it could take months before the agency reaches a decision, Hannah said.

The leaking tube was removed from service and does not present an immediate safety concern, he said.

The flaw in the steam-generating tube "was clearly identifiable and missed" by analysts working for TXU Energy, the plant's owner and operator, NRC officials said at a public meeting last month.

"The concern is the methodology used to examine the tubes and the apparent misreading of an indication that should have allowed them to identify the leak," Hannah said.

The report documents a meeting between TXU and the NRC last month, where the energy company demonstrated that "safety is Comanche Peak's highest priority," said Rand LaVonn, TXU spokesman.

"The public and our employees were never in any danger," he said. "TXU took conservative action to shut the plant down well before we were required to under NRC guidelines."

Steam generator tubes carry superheated, radioactive water from the reactor's core, passing it through nonradioactive water that is heated and converted to steam to run turbines.

There are 4,578 tubes in each of the reactor's four steam generators.

This is the first case of a leaking tube at either of the two Comanche Peak reactors, but the Unit I reactor that went on line in 1990 has had its share of problems with cracked and corroded steam tubes that have been repaired or plugged, company officials said.

There were no tube problems during the reactor's first five years of operation, but since then 700 damaged tubes have been identified and plugged -- taken out of service -- before they leaked, TXU officials said.

Leaking and cracked steam generator tubes have long been problematic at plants that were built with Westinghouse-engineered pressurized water reactors, a system installed in both of Texas' commercial nuclear power plants -- Comanche Peak and the South Texas Project.

"Neighbors of Comanche Peak and TXU ratepayers can't afford the risk to their health and their pocketbooks posed by these shoddy operations," said Erin Rogers, Lone Star Sierra Club outreach coordinator.

"These plants need to be shut down permanently and replaced with cleaner, safer alternatives, such as wind power," she said.

TXU has not yet made a decision to replace the failing steam generators. It would cost the company about \$150 million to replace Unit 1's four steam generators, TXU officials said. Neil Strassman, (817) 390-7657 strass@star-telegram.com