

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

1992-05-30

Section: METRO

Edition: FINAL AM

Page: 17

Incident at plant reviewed

Nuclear team studies role of TU Electric

Michael Whiteley Star-Telegram Writer

GLEN ROSE - On an average day at the Comanche Peak nuclear power plant, 17 to 20 alarm bulbs light the console in the Unit I control room, tagging equipment in need of change or repair. May 12 started as just such a day, until control room workers missed the one critical light that should have gone out.

During the 17 hours before a senior inspector for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission spotted the problem, the water temperature in the plant's spent fuel pool climbed 5 degrees. Unsure of regulations and using inaccurate operating documents, plant operators didn't notice the failure of a heat-exchange unit.

Their actions never posed a safety threat, NRC investigators said yesterday. But the incident rekindled ongoing concern over TU Electric's ability to train and supervise its control room operators at Comanche Peak, which is about 45 miles southwest of Fort Worth and supplies electricity to much of North Texas, including Tarrant County.

"We find a pattern indicating that corrective actions you've taken to correct previous events were apparently ineffective," Pat Gwynn, deputy director for reactor projects, told the utility. He said the utility's actions "imply a mind-set that the spent fuel pool cooling system is not as important as other elements of operations."

Gwynn said the regulatory commission will levy fines or other penalties at a later enforcement conference but has not decided on the utility's punishment. At an unusual public meeting, the special-investigations team briefed top TU Electric officials of their findings yesterday and asked them to respond.

Team leader Bill Johnson said his investigators are reviewing whether TU acted properly by pumping in water from a heat-exchange device at the Unit II reactor, which is not licensed for operation.

The water never reached temperatures beyond 100 degrees Fahrenheit, officials said. A danger warning would have signaled at 159 degrees, they said. The water would have boiled at 212 degrees. If the water had boiled, Johnson said, there is a remote chance that the spent fuel pool could have released radioactive gases.

Although it is normal for the console to contain some active alarm "enunciators," Comanche Peak operators may be facing too many warning lights, Johnson said.

Utility officials said their own review confirmed the findings of federal investigators. They said they had already launched a retraining program, created a new job for a roving supervisor and ensured that every supervisor spends at least half of each shift working alongside employees.

"TU and Comanche Peak take this error and all errors in operation and maintenance very seriously . . .," said W.J. Cahill Jr., TU Electric's nuclear group vice president. "We've used this incident to address the apparent deficiencies."

Gwynn said the utility became alarmed Jan. 8 after a failure in the plant's steam turbine generators forced a shutdown in the Unit I reactor. Utility spokesman Dave Fiorelli said plant

workers violated procedures when they failed to fulfill monitoring requirements during the restart of the reactor.

In March, the utility suspended three workers after they mistakenly opened a chemical valve connected to the Unit I reactor while the plant was up and running. The NRC recently concluded that the workers, who were assigned to fix an identical valve on the dormant Unit II reactor, received no unusual dosages of radiation.

On May 12, the operators bypassed the spent fuel pool's primary pump to allow its repair. But they switched to a back-up pump that also malfunctioned.

Citizens Association for Sound Energy, a Dallas watchdog group, warned the NRC to watch changes at Comanche Peak carefully.

"In light of the performance of the utility's prior corrective action programs . . . we remain guarded," CASE consultant Owen Thero said. "CASE feels that (the utility) should have prevented the events we've discussed today."