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Comanche Peak violations bring fine

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The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has fined TU Electric \$50,000 for seven violations at the Comanche Peak nuclear power plant that allowed contaminated water to be accidentally released within one of the two reactor units Oct. 26.

The violations were not a threat to nuclear safety, but the event is considered serious because errors were made, said Dave Fiorelli, a TU Electric spokesman. No one was injured and none of the contaminated water or any radiation was released outside the plant, NRC officials said yesterday. The power plant is in Glen Rose about 50 miles southwest of Fort Worth.

The commission listed the violations as a Level 3 on a scale of one to five, with five being the least serious, Fiorelli said.

The fine is the fourth levied against Comanche Peak since it began operation in 1990. The largest of those was \$125,000 issued in July 1992 for 12 violations during a cooling system malfunction. Nationally, the average fines for nuclear power plants, as determined by a study done between 1987 and 1991, is about \$100,000, Fiorelli said.

Comanche Peak's largest fine, about \$370,000, was issued in the mid-1980s before the plant opened. It was for a series of unrelated violations that covered several years.

The October accidents occurred while Unit 1 of the facility was out of service for refueling. At 9:50 a.m., a compressed air seal that held back the water was accidentally depressurized, allowing almost 20,000 gallons to drain through the reactor vessel into a section of a steam generator.

Later in the day, as workers tried to transfer the water, a valve-alignment error allowed 4,000 more gallons to escape into the steam generator.

Employees could have been injured had they been working in an affected steam generator, NRC officials said in a news release.

The hazard would not have been so much from radiation as from the potential for drowning had someone been in the flooded area, Fiorelli said. The water was only mildly radioactive and would have been below the NRC's exposure limit, he said. Several workers in protective clothing did have shoes that were mildly contaminated, he said.

Although TU Electric has the option of contesting the NRC decision, Fiorelli said the company will pay the fine.

NRC officials said the agency is concerned about the events because of a combination of violations that involved inattention to design control requirements, a failure to follow established procedures, poor communications and poor decisions, and failure to pay attention to NRC information.

Jim Schermbeck, program director for Texans United and a longtime opponent of the plant, said yesterday that the violations don't surprise him.

"We refer to it as the most mediocre nuclear plant in the United States - not too many fatal flaws, but things that will build up over a series of months and years," Schermbeck said. It will be on- and off-line a lot, he said.

But Fiorelli said that despite the latest problem, the plant was down less in the first 11 months of 1993 than the national average and has consistently been rated above average in the NRC's annual report card on nuclear plants.

The accident also caught the attention of the Public Utility Commission.

PUC Chairman Robert Gee said the incident will become part of an ongoing discussion with the NRC about nuclear plants.

"As the agency responsible for regulating electric rates, the Public Utility Commission is keenly interested in the safe and efficient operations of nuclear plants, since inadequate attention could result in adverse rate impacts."

Staff writer John Gonzalez contributed to this report.