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NRC STAFF PROPOSES TO FINE TU ELECTRIC \$125,000
FOR ALLEGED VIOLATIONS AT COMANCHE PEAK

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has informed TU Electric that it is proposing to fine the company \$125,000 for 12 apparent violations connected with a 17-hour loss of spent fuel pool cooling in May at Unit 1 of the Comanche Peak Steam Electric Station near Glen Rose and Granbury, Texas.

TU Electric has 30 days to pay the civil penalty or to protest it. If a protest is denied, the company may ask for a hearing.

The spent fuel pool involved in these violations is used for underwater storage of irradiated fuel assemblies removed from the reactor core during refueling. Cooling systems keep the irradiated fuel from overheating. At Comanche Peak, both Unit 1, which is licensed to operate, and Unit 2, which does not have an operating license, have spent fuel pools. Fuel elements in the Unit 1 pool were removed from the reactor core during the unit's first refueling in the fall of 1991.

On May 12, the NRC senior resident inspector at Comanche Peak questioned apparent discrepancies between control panel indications and log entries about component cooling water flow through a Unit 1 spent fuel pool heat exchanger. As a result of these questions, TU discovered that a component cooling water system misalignment had resulted in the interruption of Unit 1 spent fuel pool cooling. The heat exchanger which normally serves the spent fuel pool was out of service for maintenance and another heat exchanger was being used. But due to a recent plant modification--and unknown to a reactor operator--no heat removal was taking place because the replacement heat exchanger was not being supplied with component cooling water.

Once the situation was brought to TU's attention, plant personnel then began using the Unit 2 component cooling water system to remove heat from the Unit 1 spent fuel pool cooling system. In the process, they opened some normally locked valves. The Unit 2 system involved, however, had not been evaluated and accepted for operational use.

During the 17 hours the spent fuel pool lacked cooling, temperatures rose six degrees, but never reached the temperature limit. The incident did not endanger the general public or plant workers and did not affect plant operations. This enforcement action is based on findings of a special NRC inspection which examined the circumstances of the incident.

In his letter informing TU Electric of the proposed civil penalty, James L. Milhoan, NRC Regional Administrator in Arlington, Texas, agreed that there was no immediate safety hazard. But he said the agency nevertheless has a significant concern "that violations of requirements were found to have occurred in virtually every facet of the circumstances surrounding this event, indicating a breakdown in the control of licensed activities."

Mr. Milhoan said the individual violations resulted from failures to (1) incorporate component cooling water design changes into procedures; (2) train licensed reactor operators and auxiliary operators in the same design changes; (3) comply with system operating and administrative procedures; (4) maintain adequate and accurate procedures; (5) analyze the safety implications of using a Unit 2 system to support Unit 1 activities; and (6) repair promptly a safety-related spent fuel pool cooling water pump.

"The violations and concerns identified during this inspection," Mr. Milhoan wrote, "...suggest an inattention to detail that crossed many functional areas at [Comanche Peak] and which is below NRC's expectations of the level of attention to detail required in the operation of a nuclear power plant. Collectively, NRC considers these violations an indication of a breakdown in the control of licensed activities and an indication of a significant lack of attention to licensed requirements that could, under different circumstances, have resulted in a more significant effect on the safety of the plant."

The NRC Administrator added that TU has taken long-term corrective measures, which, he said, "appear to be comprehensive and directed at resolving both your concerns and those of NRC." He noted that TU itself had identified a "misplaced sense of urgency among plant operators with regard to accomplishing assigned tasks" as a contributing factor in this incident, and said attitude changes may therefore be required.

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