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NRC STAFF PROPOSES TO FINE OPPD \$110,000
FOR VIOLATIONS AT FORT CALHOUN NUCLEAR POWER PLANT

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has proposed a civil penalty of \$110,000 against Omaha Public Power District, operator of Fort Calhoun Station, a nuclear power plant near Fort Calhoun, Nebraska, for mistakenly disabling a safety system and allowing it to remain disabled for 12 hours.

The violation was discussed by OPPD and NRC officials during a predecisional enforcement conference in Arlington, Texas, on October 7. The incident took place during routine testing on August 21 when a licensed operator mistakenly placed the switches for both containment spray valves in a position that would not have allowed them to operate automatically, effectively disabling the automatic feature of the containment spray system. The containment spray system is one of the redundant systems designed to reduce the temperature and pressure inside the containment structure during certain accidents such as a loss of coolant accident.

The switches remained in the improper position for 12 hours despite alarm indications on the plant control board that operators should have noticed and a shift turnover during which the oncoming crew should have noticed the mispositioned switches and alarms.

The staff also noted that this was the second incident of this nature within the last 18 months. In March, 1996, relief valves were inadvertently disabled during a plant cooldown. No fine was proposed for this incident, and corrective actions taken in response should have prevented the August 21 incident.

NRC Regional Administrator Ellis W. Merschoff said in a letter to OPPD, "Although other systems at Fort Calhoun also are designed to minimize containment pressure in the event of an accident, the NRC views the August 21, 1997 event seriously because licensed operating personnel defeated a safety system and then missed several opportunities to detect it." The violation has been classified as Severity Level III in the NRC's four-level system. Level I is the most severe.

The base civil penalty for a Severity Level III violation is \$55,000. However, the staff doubled that amount, as allowed under NRC procedures, to emphasize the seriousness with which it views the occurrence of two similar incidents in 18 months.

Mr. Merschoff noted that Fort Calhoun personnel discovered the violation and reported it to the NRC. He also credited plant managers for taking effective corrective actions following the incident. These include requiring additional oversight of testing, marking alarms that are expected during tests, requiring senior reactor operator concurrence before disabling safety-related equipment, and requiring peer review prior to operating key switches.

OPPD has 30 days to respond in writing to the NRC's Notice of Violation. The response must document specific actions taken to prevent recurrence of the violations. During this time the company may pay the fine or file a protest.

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