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NRC says Pilgrim skipped routine tests

Edison says checks to be made

By Fred Kaplan
Globe Staff

WASHINGTON - Boston Edison executives at the Pilgrim nuclear power plant have not conducted 90 percent of the routine tests required to check valves designed to contain the spread of a radioactive leak in case of an accident, according to a Nuclear Regulatory Commission report.

They also failed to conduct more than a third of the tests required to measure how well various devices in the plant are able to detect and measure leaks, according to the report, which was obtained by the Globe yesterday.

A Boston Edison spokesman, Carl Gustin, said yesterday that executives at the Plymouth-based plant notified the commission of the missed tests last Friday as part of an internal review of Pilgrim's management system. Gustin said the tests were missed "because of a lack of clarity in definitions in [Boston Edison's own] technical specifications. The tests will be done before we resume operations."

After the Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident in the Soviet Union in April, US officials and nuclear-industry executives expressed doubt that such a disaster could happen here because US plants have special containment structures that would limit radiation leakage.

However, according to the commission report, it is the mechanical workings of these containment structures that Boston Edison has frequently failed to test at Pilgrim.

Richard Hubbard, a nuclear engineer formerly with General Electric (which built the Pilgrim plant), now with the San Jose-based consulting firm of MHB Associates, said yesterday, "If [Pilgrim] had been operating, some of its safety features might not have been there if called upon."

Gustin said he does not agree with Hubbard's view that the failure to conduct tests might have posed a danger if the plant were still operating. However, he added, "It's the type of situation that we will not tolerate in the future." He

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said operations might resume as early as next month.

Pilgrim has been shut down since April 12, after safety and management problems were detected. Gustin said that during the shutdown, Boston Edison has replaced the plant manager, operations manager and other key supervisors.

The commission report says Boston Edison missed 58 of 65 scheduled valve tests and 38 of 107 leakage-detection tests. The report also says it did not test the power plant's "standby liquid control system," a valve that releases a boron solution into the nuclear core to slow down the nuclear-fission process in case of an accident.

When a utility is granted a license to operate a nuclear power plant, part of the condition is a promise that it will conduct a certain number of periodic tests to determine whether the plant's containment system is tight enough to prevent leaks. The commission considers these tests so vital to safety that it also outlines the test procedures in the commission's official regulations.

Rep. Edward Markey (D-Mass.), chairman of the House subcommittee on energy conservation and power, said yesterday.

"This type of problem would appear to be symptomatic of management weaknesses. Obviously, a question that must be asked is whether there are other hidden safety problems also lurking at the plant."

An aide to Markey said he plans to hold hearings on Pilgrim next month, with all five NRC commissioners testifying.

While the plant was shut, Edison purchased replacement power from other utilities to supply its 600,000 residential customers in 40 Boston-area communities. That cost about \$250,000 a day — for a total of nearly \$16 million, Gustin said.

That could mean extra charges of about \$3.80 for most Edison customers.

The company will ask the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities to let it charge those costs to customers, Gustin said, but it has not decided whether to ask customers to pay for the six-week management reform program.

(Globe staff member Larry Tye contributed to this report.)