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## NRC raises oversight level at Fort Calhoun nuke plant

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OMAHA — Federal regulators are raising their oversight of the Fort Calhoun nuclear power plant, citing safety problems posed by a water valve that was incorrectly placed for more than a year at the plant.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission said the valve and other problems at the plant operated by Omaha Public Power District presented a low to moderate safety risk.

An NRC inspection determined a valve in the containment spray system was improperly installed on May 11, 2005, an NRC news release said Thursday. "The system sprays water in the building containing the reactor to reduce pressure under some accident conditions.

"The valve remained improperly positioned for 454 days until the problem was discovered during a refueling outage in October 2006....

The valve was installed "nearly opposite of the indicated position," the NRC said. The safety violation showed a failure by OPPD to conduct appropriate post-maintenance testing, the commission said.

Nonetheless, "the NRC remains confident in the ability of the Omaha Public Power District to operate Fort Calhoun safely," said NRC Region IV Administrator Bruce S. Mallett in the news release. "But there are performance problems that need to be addressed by the licensee."

Roger Hannah, a regional NRC public affairs officer in Atlanta, said the NRC looks at a variety of things before ordering up extra plant scrutiny.

"One is performance indicators that are reported to us by the plant — equipment problems, shutdowns and the like," he said. "The other side is inspection findings. Those are a little more subjective."

The plant, north of Omaha, had been on an operational safety par with most of the others around the nation, Hannah said.

But Fort Calhoun "is being moved to the Degraded Cornerstone Column of the NRC's Action Matrix, which will result in a higher level of scrutiny by the NRC," Mallett said. "This is the third highest level of NRC oversight, and eight other nuclear power plants in the U.S. are currently in this category."

That status begins Sunday and will last for a year, Hannah said. It will include extra inspections by NRC specialists and more management meetings to discuss OPPD efforts to address the problems.

"It will end in a year," Hannah said, "assuming they don't have any other issues" of similar safety concern or higher.

Spokesman Jeff Hanson said OPPD has already fixed the mechanical problems and will be creating a team to perform some "root-cause analyses."

"We will be focusing to find out if there are underlying issues that we need to be correcting," he said.

Should the public be concerned about safety at the plant?

"No," Hanson said. "Because the problems have been fixed. The safety cornerstone was of low to moderate safety concern to begin with. We have a history that shows we will make any corrections necessary to make certain this plant operates at the highest level of safety."

Fort Calhoun went on line in 1973 and produces 492 megawatts —almost 35 percent of OPPD’s generation needs.

In November 2003, NRC extended the plant’s operating license to 2033, 20 years beyond the original expiration date.

OPPD is one of the largest publicly owned electric utilities in the United States, serving more than 310,000 customers in 13 southeast Nebraska counties.