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Smoke Causes Scare At Nuclear Plant

Facility Evacuated After Equipment Overheats

POSTED: 6:18 pm CDT June 7, 2011
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FORT CALHOUN, Neb. -- Fort Calhoun nuclear plant crews said they saw enough smoke to set off the plant's fire alarm system Tuesday morning. It was the first such alert in 19 years.

A spokesperson with Omaha Public Power District -- the company which



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runs the plant -- said Tuesday's situation wasn't as serious as a 1992 incident where coolant leaked from a reactor into a containment building. But when dealing with a nuclear facility, the chief nuclear officer said he had no choice but to err on the side of caution.

Chief Nuclear Officer David Bannister said a piece of electrical equipment overheated, causing smoke in one of the plant's switcher rooms.

Under strict guidelines, staff members had just 10 minutes to issue an alert.

"It's better for us go ahead and declare it, ... and the whole reason you want to do that is you bring the entire organization together for a support structure," Bannister said.

Although staff evacuated the area and the electrical breaker was shut down, Bannister calls the threat isolated.

"The public was never in danger. There was obviously no release of any radioactivity or anything like that," Bannister said.

Floodwaters added to the concern, with levees and sandbags changing the lay of the land.

"We have designated areas where people are supposed go. Well, it's not the normal route where they are supposed to exit the plant," Bannister said.

Bannister said while the water made it more difficult for workers to move around, the main concern was the determining the cause of the malfunction.

"Was this brand new equipment? Older equipment? So we'll do a complete investigation," Bannister said.

The plant was already under a Level One notification due to flooding at the time of Tuesday's incident.

A federal regulatory commission is looking into the plant have a failure of a part during a test last June. OPPD officials said they don't think this recent incident will have an impact on the commission's final ruling.

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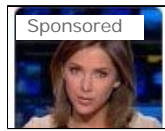
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