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Waters Encircle Nuclear Plant

By ANNA RAFF



Reuters

An aerial view of the Fort Calhoun Nuclear Power Plant in eastern Nebraska, surrounded by Missouri River flood waters on June 24.

A protective berm holding back floodwaters from a Nebraska nuclear power plant collapsed early Sunday after it was accidentally torn, surrounding containment buildings and key electrical equipment with Missouri River overflow.

Nuclear Regulatory Commission inspectors verified that processes to cool the reactor and spent-fuel pool were unaffected, the agency said in a press release.

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The 484-megawatt Fort Calhoun plant, located 19 miles north of Omaha, had been shut down since April 7 for refueling, and the NRC has said it won't be restarted until floodwaters recede.

Regulators have been keeping close watch on Fort Calhoun and Cooper Nuclear Station, both operated by the state of Nebraska, as flooding along the Missouri River has become increasingly widespread.

Two years ago, deficiencies in flood preparation at the plant were found during an inspection, but were remedied.

The situation in Nebraska has developed amid heightened fears about nuclear safety following the catastrophe at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan. The damage wreaked by an earthquake-triggered tsunami in early March was the cause of a series of explosions and the release of harmful radiation.

The water-filled berm—not required by NRC regulations— provided supplemental protection. It collapsed at about 1:25 a.m. after it was accidentally torn while work was being performed at the site, according to Victor Dricks, an NRC spokesman.

The berm, essentially a huge inner tube, subsequently collapsed. Mr. Dricks said he didn't know the exact nature of the work that was underway.

The auxiliary and containment buildings surrounded by water are protected by design to a floodwater level of 1,014 mean sea level. Missouri River levels aren't expected to exceed 1,008 feet.

The berm's collapse allowed floodwaters to wash around the main electrical transformers. As a result, emergency diesel power generators were started. Later in the day, power was restored.

The NRC's Mr. Dricks said temperature monitors were working properly and temperatures of key parts of the nuclear power plant were normal. Water has not seeped into any of the containment structures, he said.

Even when in shutdown mode, a nuclear plant requires electricity to keep key components cool in order to avoid any degradation or melting of the core that could result in the release of radiation.

In response to the berm collapse, the NRC has activated its Incident Response Center. The lowest of four levels of emergency notification remain in effect for the plant.

NRC Chairman Gregory Jaczko is scheduled to visit the plant on Monday. Water levels were receding a bit overnight, but weather forecasts are calling for more rain.

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