

No. 93-190
Tel. 301/504-2240

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
(Thursday, December 30, 1993)

NRC STAFF PROPOSES TO FINE TU ELECTRIC \$50,000
FOR APPARENT VIOLATIONS AT COMANCHE PEAK PLANT

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has informed TU Electric that it proposes to fine the company \$50,000 for apparent violations of NRC requirements at the Comanche Peak Steam Electric Station, located near Glen Rose and Granbury, Texas, southwest of Fort Worth.

TU Electric has 30 days to respond to the citation. During that time, it may pay the civil penalty or protest it. If a protest is denied, the company may ask for a hearing.

NRC is basing this action on two incidents at Comanche Peak on October 26, when about 24,000 gallons of contaminated water were accidentally released to the Unit 1 containment floor and sumps while the facility was out of service for refueling. The water spill did not affect the reactor fuel, which was all stored in the spent fuel pool, and caused no release of radiation or contaminated water outside the plant. No one was injured.

NRC conducted a special inspection October 26-November 3 to review the circumstances of the incidents after being informed of them by TU Electric. That inspection determined that the event happened this way:

TU Electric earlier had removed all the fuel from the Unit 1 reactor core and stored it in the plant's spent fuel pool, which was secured from leakage. Most of the water which had filled the refueling cavity (above the top of the reactor vessel) during the fuel transfer had been drained down to a level below that of the pipes which connect the reactor vessel to the four steam generators. Because of some steam generator testing which was under way, manways (or personnel entry ports) had been opened on two of these steam generators.

Although most of the refueling cavity had been drained, part of it was still flooded to about 23 feet above the top of the reactor vessel. This reservoir was isolated from the drained part of the cavity by a 40-foot-high lift gate equipped with an

inflatable seal. This arrangement, in effect, created a separate chamber which held the water in place so long as the pneumatic seal functioned properly.

At about 9:50 a. m. — when plant workers started switching the seal from the plant compressed air system to a pressurized nitrogen bottle — the seal was depressurized, releasing 18,000 to 20,000 gallons of water into the refueling cavity. From there, it flowed down into the reactor vessel, through the piping into the steam generators, and out the open steam generator manways into the containment floor and thence to the sump. Once operators realized what was happening, the seal was re-inflated, and the leak stopped.

But later that same day, when personnel attempted to transfer water from this reservoir to the refueling water storage tank, a valve-alignment error permitted another 4,000 gallons to flow into the containment in the same way as the earlier spill. (The company decontaminated the areas where water was spilled.)

In his letter informing TU Electric of the proposed civil penalty, James L. Milhoan, NRC regional administrator in Arlington, Texas, acknowledged that the events did not threaten the reactor fuel and caused no injury. But he said personnel injuries could have happened if someone had been working in the affected steam generator areas at the time.

"Despite these mitigating factors," he said, "the NRC remains concerned about these events because they were caused by a combination of inattention to design control requirements, a failure to use established procedures, a failure to assure that existing procedures were adequate in all respects, a lack of control of licensed activities by shift supervision, poor communications between shift personnel, poor decisions by the very personnel that TU Electric was relying upon to improve field activities. . . , and a failure to pay sufficient attention to prior NRC information regarding pneumatic seals." Mr. Milhoan said there are similarities between these incidents and one in May 1992 when operator inattention caused a loss of spent fuel pool cooling at Comanche Peak.

NRC has determined that seven violations occurred, involving TU's failure to:

- (1) See that refueling gates and seals were included in an operational quality assurance program;

- (2) Assure adequate control of materials and equipment essential to the safety related function of the refueling cavity lift gate;

(3) Use existing procedures for establishing pressure to the inflatable seal involved;

(4) Conduct pre-job briefings before hooking up of the gate seal apparatus or before changing from compressed air to nitrogen;

(5) Assure proper authorization for the contract personnel who manipulated the pressurization source for the inflatable seal;

(6) See that adequate instructions existed for assuring a reliable pressure source for the seal; and

(7) Assure that existing procedures cautioned operators about the potential for channeling water from one side of the lift gate to the other during manipulation of suction valves.

Mr. Milhoan said TU Electric appears either already to have taken or to have initiated actions to address all the factors that played a part in these incidents, including increased monitoring, appropriate personnel assignments and special training.

#