

Regulators close case questioning California reactor repairs

July 31 2015, by Michael R. Blood

Federal regulators have closed a case that questioned whether Southern California Edison violated government rules when it installed faulty equipment at the now-closed San Onofre nuclear power plant.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission ruling Thursday concluded the issue is no longer relevant since the coastal reactors, located between Los Angeles and San Diego, are retired.

In 2012, the environmental group Friends of the Earth asked the agency to review if majority owner Edison misled the NRC when it replaced twin steam generators in a \$670 million overhaul in 2009 and 2010.

San Onofre was shut down in January 2012 after a small radiation leak led to the discovery of extensive damage to hundreds of tubes inside the virtually new generators.

The plant never produced electricity again. Edison closed San Onofre for good in 2013 amid a long-running fight with environmentalists over whether the plant was too damaged to restart safely.

William M. Dean, director of the Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation, wrote that because the plant is permanently closed it is no longer necessary to rule on issues raised in the case, including whether Edison skirted rules when it installed the equipment.

The generators, which resembled massive steel fire hydrants, controlled

heat in the reactors and operated something like a car radiator. After the plant was shut down, tests found some generator tubes were so badly eroded that they could fail and possibly release radiation, a stunning finding inside the nearly new equipment.

An NRC investigation found that a botched computer analysis resulted in design flaws that were largely to blame for the unprecedented wear in the generator tubing.

Costs stemming from the demise of the plant are still being sorted out.

Some critics want the California Public Utilities Commission to reopen the case that saddled ratepayers with most of those costs, over \$3 billion. Meanwhile, Edison and the company that manufactured the generators, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, have been locked in a dispute over possible damages.

Earlier this week, Mitsubishi disclosed that Edison had nearly doubled its damage claim to \$7.57 billion in a proceeding before the International Chamber of Commerce. Mitsubishi said in a statement that its liability is limited to \$137 million by contract, and that Edison's claims are "factually incorrect, legally unsound and inappropriate."

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