

New Approach Has NRC Regulatory Smiling

BY SUSAN USHER

While Carolina Power and Light's Brunswick Nuclear Plant may or may not come off the government's watch list of problem plants this summer, federal regulators and CP&L officials agreed last week that the plant is continuing to change for the better.

Stewart D. Ebnetter, administrator of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Atlanta regional office, and other NRC officials met with company executives last Tuesday at the visitor and training center to discuss the status of the company's three-year management plan.

"Ebnetter indicated they are making good regulatory progress and apparently that is reflected in the operation of the plant," said NRC spokesman Ken Clark. "We—the NRC—are not concerned with economics but safety. However when a plant operates safely with respect to our regulations, that usually translates into good operation."

Still NRC personnel won't speculate on whether the plant will be taken off the watch list in June or July. Ebnetter will be one of the 20 or so senior executives briefing the five-member commission on which plants should be added to, removed from or continued on the list.

In April 1992 the plant was voluntarily shut down because of fake bolts found in the diesel generation building.

That July Brunswick's two reactors were placed on the list of problem reactors marked for closer NRC scrutiny because of poor performance. In June and again in December 1993, the NRC said the plant would remain on the list at least until the second unit was successfully returned to power and both units have demonstrated sustained performance.

The NRC traced those performance problems to hands-off management of the plant and lack of adequate self-assessment and correction of problems that resulted in operational and maintenance problems and degradation of the plant's physical condition.

Since the plantwide shutdown CP&L has made thousands of repairs and improvements to the plant, successfully brought both units back into operation, and begun concentrating on improving plant performance.

Unit 2, currently down for refueling and repairs, operated 313 days in a "breaker-to-breaker" run with no significant operating problems and a capacity factor of 97 percent—its best performance since the unit was first put into operation in the mid-1970s.

CP&L expects to begin modifications to the Unit 2 shroud sometime this week similar to those made on Unit 1 earlier. The shroud is a steel cylinder that rests inside the reactor vessel. It mainly directs the flow of water through the reactor. Inspectors have found some evidence of stress corrosion cracking along its upper weld seam, but not to the same extent as in Unit 1. The Brunswick plant is the first in the United States to experience this problem within its GE-built boiling water reactors.

At the Brunswick Plant and within CP&L's nuclear division, under the leadership of Vice President Roy Anderson, new standards and expectations have been established and communicated, with greater accountability and responsibility at every level for identifying and correcting problems and producing results. Its goal is to have a "world-class" plant by the year 1996.

"When people are afraid to take risks, that makes them dependent on management. When you can take some risks, then you aren't as afraid to look at what you're doing—self-assessment—and create a group or team to address the concerns you have."—Paul Cowan, Carolina Power & Light

"When we say 'world-class' we are talking about a balance between safe, reliable, economic and environmentally sound operation," says Paul Cowan, who came to the plant 1½ years ago as a loaned executive from INPO, a nuclear power organization, and was hired permanently by CP&L two weeks ago. He replaces Scotty Hinnant, the CP&L veteran who was initially appointed to the position when it was created in March 1993.

In implementing and continuously updating its plan CP&L has made extensive changes in organizational structure, and in corporate and plant management, filling senior executive slots with experienced nuclear industry personnel from outside CP&L. It is making a concentrated effort to improve internal communication at all levels and interaction between management and front-line employees, and between operations, engineering support and maintenance personnel. As a result, Cowan sees problems being confronted and being resolved more easily.

"It's a totally different Brunswick," he says.

Part of the style of the new management is "to listen to the people working in the plant," says NRC spokesman Ken Clark, "and rewarding people who bring problems to the attention of management."

That is part of the cultural change under way to get employees to commit to and work toward the site goal, to have reason to be proud of where they work and what they do and to enjoy their work.

Cowan says up front the plant is a "tough environment," in which some hard decisions have to be made and where stress is ever-present. He adds, "That doesn't mean you can't enjoy your job."

In the refurbished Unit 1 the average work-week for maintenance personnel is 43 hours now that its outage is over.

"It shows you can operate a plant without working your self to death and improve your quality of life," says Cowan, who's hoping that the day will soon come when he will be working 40 hours a week instead of

80. Part of the new results-oriented culture "means managers have to communicate not only what we want and when, but why, and how it relates to that vision," says Cowan. "If people start seeing results and it's tied to the vision, that starts snowballing."

Creating change has meant passing to employees appropriate authority and letting them know they are free to take a certain amount of calculated risk in decision areas that don't affect the safety or reliability of plant operation.

"When people are afraid to take risks, that makes them dependent on management," said Cowan. "When you can take some risks, then you aren't as afraid to look at what you're doing—self assessment—and create a group or team to address the concerns you have."

"There's a big difference between holding someone accountable and chastising someone for their mistakes."

Plant management is also looking beyond the site's responsibility to the community for safe operation to the idea of improving the community that surrounds the plant.

"We have an obligation to help make a good community," said Cowan. A new "Adopt-A-School" program that puts individual volunteers in local schools is one example of how CP&L hopes to meet that responsibility. A drive to collect books for Supply Elementary School is another.

Undergoing the kinds of changes in progress at the plant is consuming a time and energy, but Cowan likes the plant's status to that of metamorphosis, a transfiguration in progress.

"We may not be a beautiful butterfly yet, but we're not the ugly caterpillar," he said. "I think people feel we are on the verge of something very, very good."

Removal from the NRC's watch list is just one step, a marker on the way to becoming a world class plant, evidence that progress is being made.

"But it's not the goal," said Cowan.

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