Deputy Fire Marshal Al Branch, center, is accompanied by Angola Assistant Warden Duane McFatter, right, and prison safety coordinator Ronnie Fruge on a tour of the cold storage building on Thursday.

Fire code violations cited at prison storage facility

By JAMES MINTON
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ANGOLA — Fire safety inspectors documented numerous fire code violations in the Louisiana State Penitentiary's cold storage facility Thursday, but said the food warehouse could remain in operation if the problems are corrected.

Prison safety coordinator Ronnie Fruge estimated that about a six-month supply of food is stored in the warehouse, which has been partially abandoned.

"We'll require immediate attention to the violations," said Al Branch, one of two deputy state fire marshals who inspected the building.

He said the building's electrical problems should be an immediate priority.

Angola officials had feared the inspectors would order them to close the warehouse immediately, which would have required them to scramble to find alternate storage sites.

Recent fire marshal's inspections have turned up numerous code violations throughout the prison, which has more than 500 different buildings.

The warehouse includes several large rooms kept at 50 degrees for storing a variety of bulk U.S. Department of Agriculture commodities, as well as large freezers for fresh meat storage.

Fruge said Angola also stores food for other smaller prisons in the warehouse.

Branch said the fire safety code adopted in 1967 was used in making the inspections because of the building's age. More recent fire code revisions would hold the facility to stricter standards.

In addition to the electrical violations, Branch said he found aisles blocked with pallets of bulk commodities and only one exit in the bulk storage area.

A second exit — near the door now in use — was blocked with a large iron bar secured by a padlock.

Fruge estimated that a maximum of 40 inmates are either inside or outside the building when food is moved from trucks to the warehouse.

He said some exits may have been blocked years ago to help control rodent problems.

The abandoned portion of the building includes an old ice house, a slaughterhouse and a meat-cutting school.

The inspectors documented several areas with dangling, bare electrical wires and wires not enclosed in conduit.

Operable and inoperable refrigeration units remain side by side, but the inoperable equipment still has electrical wiring running to it.

The main power feed should be rewired because the electrical cables are hanging too low, Branch said.

He said some of the exposed wiring may not be connected, but inspectors regard any exposed wiring as being "hot."

In addition to the fire safety code violations, one insulated wall of a large freezer room is bulging and cracking. Fruge said moisture is apparently building a large ice mass within the wall.

Recent fire marshal's inspections have turned up numerous code violations throughout the prison, which has more than 500 different buildings, scattered over 18,000 acres.

Corrections officials ordered the new inspections after the deputy state fire marshal assigned to Angola, who was later fired, offered prison officials blank stationery to use to write their own fire code exemptions for a since-postponed American Correctional Association accreditation audit.

The potential costs of correcting code violations led state officials to begin closing two outcamps at the penitentiary.

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