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GSU pleased with River Bend operation

By STEVE CULPEPPER
Baker-Zachary bureau

It’s been just about one year since Gulf States Utilities Co. first cranked up its River Bend nuclear plant and only about six months since the plant went into commercial operation. A year after the beginning, GSU seems pleased with the way the plant runs.

GSU hasn’t had nearly as much trouble out of its only nuclear project as it has in its effort to convince regulators that ratepayers should pick up the check for the $4.5 billion plant.

GSU calls the plant a “nuclear industry success story,” because of its relatively quick construction — about six years — and its rapid jump from low-power license to full-power license.

Still, there have been some concerns within the Nuclear Regulatory Commission over the large number of scrams, or unplanned reactor shutdowns, at River Bend.

The minutes of a GSU board committee on nuclear safety last September show that top management of the NRC was, at that time at least, worried about the performance of the plant.

According to the minutes, former U.S. Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Robert H. Barrow — a member of the GSU board — told the committee that he talked with the new NRC Chairman Lando Zech, who expressed the NRC’s concern over performance at River Bend.

Zech told Barrow that “there is an increased perception within the NRC of poor performance in operations at River Bend,” according to the minutes.

He (Zech) stated that the general consensus is that personnel at the River Bend station were requested to provide quick construction while assuring safety. While River Bend personnel performed admirably, they are now requested to provide high quality operations. This is a different emphasis which is identifying some aspects of the plant which may require modification in design or procedures,” the minutes state.

Apparently the NRC was and is still concerned over the large number of scrams at River Bend. But NRC Project Manager Steve Stern, who oversees River Bend in Washington, believes that although there were too many scrams and other problems, River Bend is now performing well.

Stern also praised GSU management because they “jumped on problems” as they occurred and found the resources to fix them.

“We’re just impressed with the way they’ve kept on top of procedures,” the minutes state.
problems," Stern said.

He also said that NRC top management has decided to not focus too closely on performance of plants during their first year of operation, a year in which problems are expected, he said.

The NRC project manager said the NRC feels that GSU did a good job of building River Bend in a short time frame.

GSU got its low-power license Aug. 29, 1985, fuel loading was completed Sept. 21, 1985, the first chain reaction -- or initial criticality -- occurred Oct. 31, 1985, and GSU got its full-power license Nov. 20, 1985.

Five-percent power output was achieved on Nov. 25, and on Dec. 3, 1985, River Bend was synchronized to the transmission grid. Near the end of 1985 River Bend revved up to 20-percent power output, cranking out 200 of its potential 940 megawatts. On June 16, 1986, River Bend went into full commercial operation.

GSU top management at River Bend appears pleased with the way the plant's been running.

Jim Booker, manager of licensing for River Bend and plant manager Tom Plunkett say the plant has operated as expected -- and in some cases better than the industry average for its type.

In the first part of 1986 -- during the plant's startup and test phase -- River Bend had a high number of scrams. The NRC sent teams down to investigate the plant but Booker and Plunkett said the NRC found no significant problems.

River Bend had 17 scrams from initial criticality until commercial operation in June of last year. There have been five scrams since then, Booker said.

Stern said that River Bend and other plants with boiling water reactors, experienced a similar large number of scrams and problems during early operation. "But then they (the number of scrams) come down," he said.

The first five and a half months of 1986 were "entirely startup," Plunkett said. "We were doing required testing."

The plant manager said that all owners of an NRC operating license are required to conduct the startup and test phase. "We don't have a lot of say with what we can do," he said.

River Bend was shut down for a number of days during 1986. The longest period was for 56 days during most of October and all but one day of November for surveillance testing.

The October testing outage "went so well" that GSU decided to go ahead and perform tests set for February -- a two-week outage -- at the same time. That decision allowed GSU to save one cold shutdown, Plunkett said.

With its current low-demand needs for power, River Bend is supplying about 24 to 25 percent of GSU's total megawatts. For the first six months of commercial operation -- including the nearly two-month planned outage in October and November -- River Bend supplied about 14 percent of GSU's power needs, according to Booker.

"We did all the testing and it passed," Plunkett said. "These units are good units."

The "unit" Plunkett mentioned is the General Electric BWR (boiling water reactor) 6 Mark III. The first BWR 6 Mark III went into commercial operation in 1981 and so far has operated well, Plunkett said.

To date, according to GSU, River Bend has generated about 3 million megawatt hours of electricity.

But besides its unplanned reactor shutdowns, all hasn't been rosy for GSU and its nuclear plant.

This past summer the NRC fined GSU $65,000 for a Level II security violation. The Level II -- the second highest given against nuclear plant operators -- was given because GSU "demonstrated deficiencies in management's ability to exercise effective personnel-access control and failure of management to recognize and correct plant-designed deficiencies as they relate to implementation of the security program."

From June through September 1986, River Bend received 10 NRC violations, two of which were Level III.

One of the Level III violations was due to a security guard found asleep and the other was for radioactive waste that was shipped to a disposal site with a detectable liquid content.

Booker said he could not comment on anything related to security at River Bend but "appropriate measures" were taken with the guard found asleep.

As GSU intensified its campaign to get River Bend reflected in its rates, and as it deepened its threat of bankruptcy if increased rates are not granted, the NRC late last year issued a warning to GSU that it wants to be kept abreast of any changes in management -- especially those related to River Bend.

The NRC told GSU that since it granted current management the license to operate River Bend, it wants to know if anybody else, other than those licensed to run the plant, are making decisions regarding operation of River Bend.

Still, according to Stern, NRC top management is pleased, overall, with the performance of Louisiana's second nuclear power plant.

And although the NRC has taken a dim view of the large number of unplanned shutdowns and other problems at the plant, NRC management understands that the plant is new and that problems are expected, according to Stern.

He likened the plant to a new car in which the bugs have to be worked out before it begins performing with reliability.

"I believe that next month River Bend will be evaluated (as to performance), because it will be well into its second year," Stern said.

At that time the NRC will assess how the plant -- now a mature nuclear project -- performs.