Waterford reactor still off

TAFT, La. (AP) — Crews worked Saturday to fix a leak that was discovered after a small fire shut down the Waterford 3 nuclear power plant three days earlier, said a Louisiana Power & Light Co. spokesman.

"We're not back up yet," said Jim Fort.

"The fire didn't really cause us any delay. What did cause us to pause more than we expected was the discovery of a leak in the main condenser."

He said steam which has passed through the generator and turbine is cooled in the condenser by Mississippi River water, then returns to the generator to be turned back into steam.

"The leak was allowing a small amount of river water to get into the system," he said.

The leak was found by inspectors who checked out the plant while it was shut down because of a small fire Wednesday, he said.

Oil leaked from some bearings, dripped into the insulation and caught fire, Fort said. The fire was out in less than 10 minutes and the damage was fixed in less than a day, he said.

The fire was the fourth time that officials have declared an "unusual event" — a high classification for problems as outlined by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The leak probably would be fixed by Sunday, Fort said.

He predicted that the reactor will be brought to full power by midweek, and said it probably will be ready for commercial operation by mid-July.

Waterford 3, the first completed nuclear plant in Louisiana, is 25 miles up the Mississippi River from New Orleans.

It was licensed in March to work toward commercial operation, but problems have put off the opening. In all, it is seven years behind schedule and 12 times more expensive than originally estimated.

During construction, the plant was plagued with cracks in its foundations and the company was fined $130,000 by the NRC for sloppy record keeping.