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Push to restart plant affected workers' standards, report says

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BUCHANAN - Management pressure to quickly restart Indian Point 2 led workers to mishandle the nuclear reactor's operation while dealing with a faulty steam generating system last week, according to an internal Consolidated Edison report.

"Pressure to perform while restoring the unit to service may have led the operators to reduce their questioning attitude and make them more willing to accept less than adequate plant conditions during start-up," the 16-page report states.

The report, obtained by The Journal News yesterday, delineates a series of events on Jan. 2 that led to the power turbine's temporary shutdown and a loss of control of the coolant water temperature. Power also fell in the nuclear reactor near to the point where it would shut itself off.

Yesterday, Con Edison officials ordered a two-day "stand-down" at the facility. The plant will continue to produce power at the current 30 percent level, but all nonessential activities will be postponed until the stand-down ends.

Steve Quinn, Con Edison's vice president for operations, said all 800 managers and employees involved in plant operations would attend special classes over a two-day period to deal with safety issues, analyze problems in the operation, and dispel any perceptions about management pressure to quickly bring the plant to full power.

The first class given to supervisors yesterday was intended to reinforce the idea among managers that they should not indicate impatience with words or gestures. "We try not to give people the sense they should ever take a shortcut," Quinn said.

"It's that supervisor who looked disgusted that maybe led an operator to do things not with ultimate care, but quickly," he said. "We have got to learn from this event."

On Jan. 2, as the plant was about to go operational, plant operators noticed an apparent loss of pressure in a system that should have been in a vacuum. The leak of air was equivalent to a valve being opened about 10 percent.

Operators should have halted procedures and found the cause of the system's apparent leak, Quinn said. But the start-up was already two days behind the utility's publicly announced schedule, so operators ignored the leak and turned on a second pump. Plant sensors automatically shut down the turbine.

Con Edison officials had insisted for weeks that the plant would be restarted by Dec. 31, following a nearly yearlong shutdown prompted by a radioactive water and steam leak.

"We could have ended up shutting the plant down if nothing else was done," Quinn said of the incident before last week's restart. "But that would have been preferable to making a wrong decision because the operator thought he was under pressure."

The decision to turn on the second pump put too much cool water in the reactor's steam generator too suddenly, leading to what the Con Edison report terms the "uncontrolled" drop in reactor coolant water temperatures.

Operators attempted to control the temperature by increasing the nuclear reactions, but misjudged what was happening in the reactor core. As a result, Quinn said, the power level fell from 6.5 percent to 0.7 percent - approaching a level where it would shut itself off.

Though the incident did not threaten the safety of the plant workers or the surrounding community, it was serious enough that the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission was supposed to have been notified within four hours. That did not happen, the report said.

NRC officials could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Rep. Sue Kelly, R-Katonah, a persistent critic of Con Edison's operation of the plant, said she was disappointed but not surprised that a "keep-the-plant-running-at-all-costs mentality has taken hold there."

"It puts pressure on the people who work over there," Kelly said. "It's exactly what I've been howling about all along."

Kelly was among several elected officials, including Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano, and anti-nuclear activists who called for the plant's shutdown last week until the NRC completed a full inspection expected to begin Tuesday.

Susan Tolchin, a spokeswoman for Spano, said yesterday that the county executive was "concerned with the pressure to perform." She called the report honest and said "they are not covering anything up."

"The pressure should be to make sure the plant is safe, and that should be the only pressure they have," she said.