The New York Times

Clipped From: NEW YORK TIMES APRIL 1, 1990

Georgia A-Plant Accident Getting Sharp U.S. Scrutiny

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Special to The New York Times

ATLANTA, March 31 — An accident that occurred at a Georgia nuclear power plant on March 21 is focusing renewed attention on one of the most worrisome potential problems at nuclear plants: the loss of electrical power to run the plant and cool its reactor fuel.

Officials of the Georgia Power Company say there was no risk to the public in the incident at its Plant Vogtle nuclear power plant. A truck ran into a power pole, cutting off electricity to the plant for 36 minutes.

But the Federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission has organized a 10-member team to investigate the incident just as the commission is reviewing plans submitted by the nation's 113 nuclear generating plants. It is the end of

For 17 minutes, a blackout became an emergency.

a decadelong effort to establish standards to prevent and respond to such blackouts.

Critics Voice Alarm

Industry officials and the N.R.C. say the complexity of the issue and the enormous differences among plants explain the difficulty in formulating nationwide regulations for dealing with power failures.

But some critics, like Robert D. Pollard, a former N.R.C. engineer who is with the Union of Concerned Scientists, say the Vogtle incident offers a glimpse of a larger issue. "The significance of the event is that it illustrates the danger of the N.R.C. leaving high-priority safety issues unresolved for more than 10 years," he said.

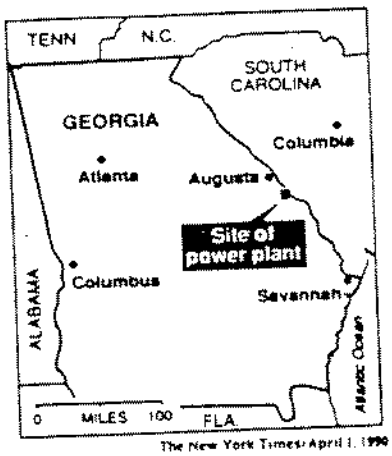
The incident began when a construction truck backed into a transformer pole in a switching yard that supplies power to the plant. That cut off power to one of its two units, which was being refueled.

Two backup diesel engines were supposed to kick in if power was lost. One failed to do so and the other was undergoing maintenance. The incident also shut down the other reactor; the regulatory commission is still investigating to determine why.

The lack of a functioning backup power system led the plant's officials to declare a "site area emergency," the second highest of four categories developed by the N.R.C. It was only the second such emergency since the categories were developed in 1979.

'Never Any Danger'

But officials said that despite the potential for serious problems, the emergency ended soon afterward. Seventeen minutes after the truck struck the pole, the emergency was downgraded to an "alert," the third highest category. Shortly afterward the backup generator was started manually. The alert was canceled in about four hours.



At Plant Vogtle, electrical power was lost for 36 minutes.

"There was never any danger to the public, never any release of radiation and never any danger to employees," said Tal Wright, a spokesman for Georgia Power.

But there was enough potential for serious problems that the regulatory commission assigned a team to investigate. It was only the agency's fifth such investigation, and it has the potential for effects on nuclear plants nationwide.

"The N.R.C. management felt that this was a good opportunity to take an in-depth look at the station blackout question," said Ken Clark, a spokesman for the commission. "There was for a period of time the potential for the situation to deteriorate, but it did not."

A 1975 N.R.C. report on reactor safety first focused attention on the problem. In its annual reports for the past decade, the agency has listed blackouts at nuclear power stations as an "unresolved safety issue." In 1988, it developed station blackout guidelines for the industry.

'A Lack of Completeness'

But an audit last fall found that initial responses from utilities were often inadequate or inaccurate. A draft letter prepared by the N.R.C. staff said its audit of 10 blackout plans showed "a lack of completeness and a tendency to interpret or extend the guidance in a manner to justify minimum design changes rather than improved protection against station blackout."

One proposal, for example, recommended that the control room be evacuated to save power to deal with an emergency. Another cited an analysis that the nuclear panel determined was never done. The letter called for the unusual step of requiring utilities to submit a sworn statement that their response was accurate and adequately documented.

An industry group, the Nuclear Management and Resources Council, protested the staff's proposed letter and persuaded the commission to allow it to help utilities comply with the guidelines without having to make sworn statements to the regulatory commission.

Russell Bell, a program manager in the technical division of the industry group, said the group had long been involved in the blackout issue and felt the utilities and the N.R.C. would best be served if it provided guidance and assistance to insure a proper response.

And he said progress had been made on the issue even though it had taken a long time to develop regulations and for utilities to comply with them. "It's important to note that in the period we're talking about the reliability of diesel generators at the nuclear plants, which are the primary defense against blackout, has consistently improved," he said.