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ENERGY

End in sight for lengthy repairs to New Brunswick power plant

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CP; Canadian Press; The Canadian Press

Fredericton NB - Atlantic Canada's only nuclear power plant is expected to complete its refurbishment this fall, marking the end of a risky project that saw spills, cost overruns and federal-provincial squabbling.

When the Point Lepreau generating station in New Brunswick was shut down in March, 2008, NB Power officials said the refurbishment would span 18 months and cost \$1.4-billion.

More than four years and another billion dollars later, the provincial Crown utility company is hoping the repairs will extend the plant's life by 27 years, supplying about one-third of New Brunswick's power needs.

"Point Lepreau will be a valuable asset and a great investment for \$2.4-billion," NB Power president Gaetan Thomas said in an interview.

"We are still going to be able to produce clean energy from Point Lepreau - over 700 megawatts - for less than nine cents per kilowatt hour and that makes it a very competitive option."

But Norm Rubin of Energy Probe, a Toronto-based energy watchdog group, said the refurbishment and the lapses along the way underscore the risks associated with nuclear technology.

"Because it's nuclear it is inherently hazardous and everything has to go right," Mr. Rubin said.

"Because of that, every kind of small boo-boo turns into a megaproject boo-boo, so it is an unforgiving technology.

"Some of the problems that turned this thing into a laughing stock were really weird ... like dropping a turbine into the ocean."

On Oct. 15, 2008, two turbine rotors plunged into the Saint John harbour as they were being loaded onto a barge for delivery to Point Lepreau. They had to be recovered and sent back to the manufacturer for repair in Britain.

There were also two spills of radioactive-heavy water within the past year, one of which prompted an evacuation. In each case no one was hurt and the heavy water was retrieved.

The setbacks were noticed by Hydro-Québec, which announced last month that it would not proceed with a \$4.3-billion refurbishment of its Gentilly-2 reactor - the only nuclear power plant in Quebec. The Crown-owned utility company's president cited the problems at Point Lepreau as a factor in the decision.

Critics of the work at Point Lepreau constantly warned of what happened in Ontario. In 1997, four nuclear reactors in Pickering, Ont., were shut down to perform upgrades to the emergency shutdown system, and the effort to restart them resulted in long delays and major cost overruns.

A review committee appointed by the Ontario government attributed the cost hikes to bad management.

"We actually applied all the lessons from Ontario, but because it was the first time to do a CANDU-6 reactor there were other lessons to be learned," Mr. Thomas said.

One of the biggest lessons to be learned was how to properly replace the plant's 380 calandria tubes, which house fuel channels and uranium fuel bundles that power the reactor.

Point Lepreau was commissioned in 1983 and was the world's first CANDU-6 reactor to begin commercial production of electricity.

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