Fire Disables Blue Mesa Powerplant

A fire in the station service switchgear at Blue Mesa Powerplant on March 24, 1986, has temporarily shut down power generation, pending repairs, it was announced today by Clifford Barrett, Regional Director of the Bureau of Reclamation. The accident occurred at 11:03 a.m., apparently as a result of an electrical fault in an overhead crane.

According to witnesses, the electrical fault caused a fire in a station service board that was providing local power to the plant. One of the two Blue Mesa generators was not operating at the time.

One witness stated that the "fire" was more like a bolt of lightning flashing and roaring behind the control board. Although frightening to experience, the flashing and noise soon ceased as the evacuation alarm sounded and the plant fell into darkness.

A dense cloud of smoke from burned insulation filled the plant as workers quickly made an emergency evacuation. All seven employees present left the plant with no injuries.
Using self-contained breathing apparatus, a pair of workers entered the plant to open large doors to clear the smoke. An emergency generator was used to supply power to the river bypass valves, which were opened to allow the continuous release of water from Blue Mesa Reservoir. Although no water was released for about three hours on March 24 immediately after the accident, little or no environmental damage to fish occurred because Morrow Point Reservoir was full and backed up to the Blue Mesa Powerplant.

Barrett pointed out that, although Blue Mesa Powerplant was generating about 34 megawatts of power at the time of the accident, the loss of power caused by the accident was immediately made up by an increase in generation at other hydroplants within the interconnected system, and that no power outage to customers resulted.

No official estimate has been yet made of the cost of repair, but it does not appear to be major, according to Barrett. He said that repair work has already begun on restoring station service. One generator should be available for operation late this week, although with limited duty.