'Apparent violation'

Nuclear station officials to request conference with NRC

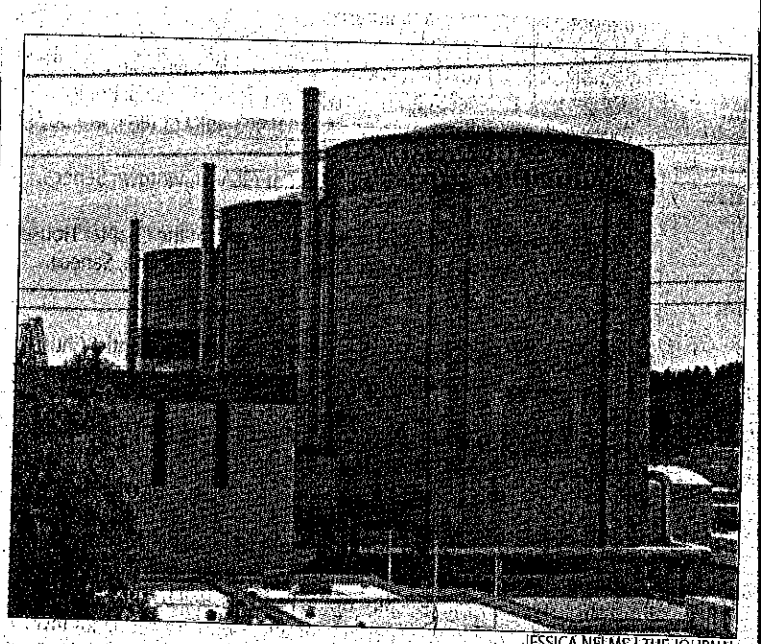
BY NORMAN CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Duke Energy's Oconee Nuclear Station will request a regulatory conference with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) in response to a letter informing Duke of an "apparent violation" related to the shutdown of a nuclear reactor for three weeks last year.

The conference is one of the options Oconee officials have in response to the apparent violation that was the subject of a letter last week from the NRC to Duke site vice president Scott Batson. The letter stated that the apparent violation has been determined to be "greater than green," which means it is greater than a very low significance.

"Your measures failed to

SEE VIOLATION, PAGE A5



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Unit No. 1 at the Oconee Nuclear Station was shut down for about three weeks last fall after a leak was discovered in a containment building as a result of a crack in a pipe that provides backup water to the reactor coolant system. That crack is now the subject of an "apparent violation" cited by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

VIOLATION: No problems since December

FROM PAGE A1

identify and correct a significant condition adverse to quality involving a crack in a weld located in the Unit 1 high-pressure injection system," the letter stated.

The letter also requested additional information at least one week prior to the regulatory conference and said the NRC's finding "is being considered for escalated enforcement action."

Oconee spokeswoman B.J. Gatten confirmed Monday that officials plan to ask for the conference, a request that must be made within 10 days of the June 26 letter. The actual conference would be scheduled within 30 days, according to NRC spokesman Joey Ledford.

"That letter is a step in the NRC's process in analyzing events like this," Gatten said. "We have some additional information that we believe impacts that evaluation, so we are going to ask for a meeting."

Unit No. 1 was shut down Nov. 11 for three weeks after officials discovered the leak in a containment building. Repairs began on the unit before Thanksgiving. A pipe that provides backup water to the reactor coolant system was cracked and was identified as the source of the leak.

Gatten said the leak was less than one-tenth of a gallon per minute and was inside the reactor's containment building, the leak never posed a threat to the community and customer service was not interrupted.

Gatten said "expert nuclear-qualified welders" were brought in to assist in cutting out the pipe so that it could be sent to Duke's Metallurgy lab near Charlotte, N.C., for analysis. Inspections at the plant's two other reactors did not reveal similar problems with pipes there.

She said Monday the reactor has been operating safely since it came back online in December.

"We've taken steps to improve the weld inspection procedure, and those procedures are already in place to make sure we don't have a similar event like this in the future," she said.

Ledford said while the November incident did not pose any safety issues at the nuclear station or the nearby community, "there's a potential that it could be a safety concern," and the commission has asked Duke for more information about potential issues that could occur.

"We don't want anything in the high-pressure injection system to be leaking; that's really one of the first lines of defense," Ledford said. "You want that system to be operable to be able to cool the reactor. That's why we've asked for more information. The concern is under some of these scenarios that system being inoperable or degraded could cause safety significance. It is important to note there was no actual safety issue here because the leak was promptly repaired."

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