

# DUKE: OCONEE GETS UPGRADES

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## TAKING ACTION

Duke Energy says it's making safety improvements at its three-reactor complex in Oconee County in the wake of the problems discovered after Japan's disaster.

KEN OSBURN / Staff

## Critic says watchdog moving too slowly

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Duke Energy said it is moving ahead with safety improvements to its huge three-reactor Oconee Nuclear Station while federal regulators consider whether more steps need to be taken.

The Oconee complex on the shores of Lake Keowee, along with all of the nation's nuclear plants, was thrust into a federal and public reappraisal after the nuclear disaster in Japan.

Safeguards once considered to be impregnable fell apart in Japan when the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant was overwhelmed by an earthquake and tsunami. The resulting releases of radioactivity have led to a worldwide re-assessment of nuclear energy, with Germany deciding to phase it out.

A U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission task force has recommended more safety steps to the full commission, which hasn't yet taken action. A

critic of the nuclear industry said the delay raises questions about the eagerness of the NRC and the industry to take more action.

Spokesmen for the commission and for the nuclear industry's organization deny the suggestion.

Some of the safety measures being taken at Oconee were in the works before Japan, particularly those guarding against natural disasters, said Sandra Magee, a Duke spokeswoman.

In the weeks following multiple reactor meltdowns in Japan, industry and federal regulators inspected all U.S. plants.

The NRC found weaknesses at Oconee, including outdated and poorly placed copies of disaster guidelines and a blocked emergency vent line. Andy Sabisch, senior resident NRC inspector at Oconee, told GreenvilleOnline.com that the issues have been corrected.



SUZIE RIDDLE/Staff

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Oconee's self-evaluation led to relocation of some portable onsite emergency equipment and replacement and preventative maintenance on equipment such as batteries and hoses, said Robert Cook, a spokesman at Oconee.

Magee said other steps are being considered. "Learning from that event is an ongoing effort not just for Duke but the whole nuclear industry," she said.

The five commissioners

who set policy for the NRC have yet to act on task force recommendations on other steps, said commission spokesman Joey Ledford.

"Once the commission decides a course of action on the task force recommendations, the staff will implement them. At that point, the plants, including Oconee, will have a more detailed path forward," Ledford said.

Tom Clements, former director of the Nuclear Control Institute and the regional campaign coordinator for Friends of the Earth, said the commissioners "need to act soon to

make sure the task force report is not just going to fall flat."

Clements said he fears the NRC "is dragging its feet on implementing the recommendations" and the industry "is starting to push back in order to make sure that the changes and regulations are minimal and don't cost much."

It's not about cost, said Mitch Singer, spokesman for the Nuclear Energy Institute, the industry's policy organization.

The industry "will put in to effect any changes to enhance safety no matter what the cost," Singer said. "This industry's success is

predicated on the safe operation of our plants. If we weren't operating safely, we wouldn't operate at all. The NRC would shut us down."

Like the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that triggered an industry evaluation of loss of power scenarios, Japan's crisis has prompted examination of plants' abilities to withstand a combination of natural or man-made disasters that could cause damage to multiple reactors on a plant site, Singer said.

Sabisch said the NRC isn't dragging its feet. Immediate action was taken to address findings of post-Japan inspections, Sabisch

said.

Sabisch said the NRC wants to avoid a "knee-jerk reaction" that followed Three Mile Island, where he worked at the time of a partial meltdown in 1979, when a rapid series of mandated modifications later were found to be more cumbersome than beneficial and had to be reworked.

Meanwhile, the industry "has taken actions independent of the NRC" and is "looking for generic issues that came out of the task force report and is moving ahead with some of those," Sabisch said.

Duke's three nuclear

power plants in the Carolinas have added preventative maintenance, increased frequency of some testing and maintenance, and evaluated the best possible staging locations for back-up emergency equipment, said Rita Sipe, a Duke spokeswoman.

"There is a lot of work behind the scenes," Sipe said.

"We as an industry are not going to let this go. We understand that there are lessons to be learned from this, and we are going to learn all of them," Sipe said. "It's dropped off the national media radar somewhat but there is a lot going on in the industry."