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Duke Energy defends Oconee nuclear repair delays

No risk to the public, energy company says

By Anna Simon
Clemson bureau

Oconee Nuclear Station has been called on the carpet by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission over blocked waterlines for emergency use, a four-month delay in checking two reactors for the problem and an inaccurate technical report — a situation a Duke Energy spokeswoman said never compromised public safety and has been corrected.

The dispute centers around the extent of the threat, if any, and whether there were violations that could lead to added federal oversight of the nuclear plant on Lake Keowee near the Pickens-Oconee county line.

Tens of thousands of Upstate residents live within 10 miles of the nuclear station, and Lake Keowee is a popular recreation area and a source of drinking water for hundreds of thousands of people.

The matter will be hashed out on July 13 at the federal agency's regional office in Atlanta, where Duke will have the opportunity to respond to potential safety violations cited by the NRC that could lead to added federal oversight at Oconee.

The situation involves a standby shutdown facility procedure that would be used to drain water from the reactors only in certain highly unlikely emergency situations such as sabotage or turbine building flooding, said Addie Bradshaw, a Duke spokeswoman. The standby shutdown facility still could have been used if needed, she said.

The process would have been "a little more complicated," but the public "was not endangered and was not threatened by this," Bradshaw said.

When asked what could happen in an emergency, Jonathan Bartley, chief for Reactor Projects Branch 1 of the NRC, said "it's unnecessary to speculate at this time" and the "significance of the issues" would be determined following the July 13 discussion.

It's "highly unlikely" that the standby shutdown facility, which is intended for "very low probability events" such as fire damage to certain equipment and some tornadoes, would have been used, Bartley said.

The initial problem was discovered in Unit 1 during a routine maintenance and refueling outage in October, and the filter and gasket were removed, said Andrew Sabisch, senior NRC resident inspector at Oconee. A gasket had broken down and blocked a filter on the waterline inside the containment building, he said.

A Duke investigation attributed the problem to an isolated manufacturing defect, and filters in units 2 and 3 weren't immediately checked, Sabisch and Bradshaw said.

The NRC didn't require Duke to check them based on a technical report that indicated an alternate method could buy time in an emergency if lines from units 2 and 3 were blocked, Sabisch said.

Duke didn't intentionally provide inaccurate information, and immediately informed the NRC when a portion of the information was found to be wrong, Sabisch said.

The inaccurate information was based on an assumption that a manually operated valve that would be used in the alternate method was open, according to Sabisch and an NRC report. The information

wasn't thoroughly checked and the valve turned out to be closed.

Duke's initial analysis "could have been more thorough," Bradshaw said. "We take this situation very seriously."

An independent review in February found possible blockage in units 2 and 3, and Duke then removed the filters and gaskets from those lines, according to Sabisch and the report.

Duke now is checking other systems that use the same filter to be sure the problem doesn't exist elsewhere and will test the lines more frequently, Bradshaw said.

The lines were required to be tested only when they were installed and had never been used, Bradshaw said. They now will be tested during each unit's regular 18-month maintenance and refueling outage, she said.