Duke, NRC to discuss dam risks

Goal is to ensure safety at Oconee plant, utility says

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WASHINGTON — Oconee Nuclear Station's ability to protect against floods and fires will be the focus of back-to-back meetings this week between federal regulators and Duke Energy officials.

Nuclear Regulatory Commission staffers will receive an update Tuesday on Duke Energy's earlier declaration that the risk of a Jocassee Dam failure is not a credible threat to the safe operation of its nuclear power plant on Lake Keowee. The NRC hasn't decided if it agrees with that assessment.

On Wednesday, Duke Energy officials return to the NRC to explain their plan for finishing new fire safety systems that are long overdue. The NRC is considering sanctions against the company for missing a Jan. 1 deadline.

Together, the meetings put Oconee in the spotlight as federal regulators, responding to the 2011 Japanese tsunami disaster, try to make sure American nuclear power plants can withstand natural disasters.

"Our goal – and the NRC's goal – is to ensure the continued safe operation of the plant," Duke Energy spokeswoman Pam Anderson said.

The potential for a dam failure upstream from the Oconee Nuclear Station has concerned nuclear regulators for decades, according to newly released internal documents.

But even if the dam is damaged by an earthquake or over-topped by rising lake levels, public safety would not be threatened, according to Duke's recent assessment, which has not been made public. NRC whistle-blowers and nuclear industry watchdogs are focusing on Oconee to see how strictly the agency implements lessons from the Fukushima disaster.

Duke Energy officials were at NRC headquarters in Maryland a month ago to explain why they failed to finish a key part of the fire protection system on time. On Wednesday, company officials will discuss their four-year plan to finish

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the work, including a series of milestones they say they'll meet before full compliance in November 2016.

"We have developed specific and achievable plans to meet the commitments we have made to the NRC," Anderson said.

The meeting is expected to help the NRC decide how strongly to sanction the company for the missed deadline, a decision due this summer.

The company said its missed deadline — which has delayed reducing safety risks at the plant but didn't increase current risks — shouldn't result in financial penalties.

"Interim measures have been implemented and will remain in place to ensure the safety of the facility until the permanent modifications are completed," Anderson said.

In 2004, the NRC allowed nuclear plant operators to begin switching from rigid, one-size-fits-all fire protection rules to a more customized system based on each plant's risks. Oconee is a pilot project for the new system.

Oconee Nuclear Station is 40 miles west of Greenville and has three pressurized water reactors.