# Duke, feds discuss Oconee fire safety

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SENECA — As Duke Energy celebrated 40 years of safe operations at the Oconee Nuclear station, officials met with representatives from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission on Wednesday to discuss issues to try to ensure that safety record continues.

Duke officials gave an update on efforts to comply with the new fire safety plan as well as other major projects at a meeting Wednesday with NRC representatives. Commission members pressed Duke to get the projects completed as soon as possible.

"We are looking for some of these projects to get completed," said Eric Leeds, director of the NRC's office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation. "We want you to keep whipping the horse down to the finish line and get them done."

The Oconee station has implemented 44 of 47 areas of the fire safety plan, according to Terry Patterson, Oconee safety assurance manager.

The Oconee site and the Shearon Harris Nuclear Power Plant near Raleigh, N.C., were involved in a pilot project to meet new fire regulations. Duke had agreed to complete its changes by Dec. 31, 2012. In July, Duke asked for a two-year extension of the deadline, which was denied in a Jan. 15 letter from the NRC, and is currently out of compliance.

Duke spokeswoman Sandra Magee said earlier this month the biggest project left is the installation of a new protected service water system, which will provide protection for all three reactors. She estimated the service water system would be completed within 24 months.

"We are disappointed that we did not meet the deadline," said Regis Repko, Duke's senior vice president for nuclear operations. "We underestimated the scope of the project. It provided a number of challenges."

Preston Gillespie, site vice president at the Oconee station, said the improvements Duke has made have improved safety.

"We are focused on safety and we do need to finish these projects," said Gillespie. "But, the plant is safer now."

Duke officials emphasized improvements they were making and efforts toward getting into compliance with the fire regulations.

"We have made great strides in our preparations, but we still have work to do in front of us," said Jim Fuller, general manager of the protected water service project. "My sole focus is to bring this project to completion."

Leeds commended Fuller on his commitment to completing the project and said the NRC would hold him and other Oconee officials accountable.

"The pressure is on you," Leeds told Fuller.

Michele Evans, director of the commission's Division of Operating Reactor Licensing, said the NRC will send a letter to Duke next week giving it the choice of meeting with commission representatives personally or providing a written response to the denial of the extension. A meeting or written response would then happen within 30 days of the letter, she said.

"We are in the beginning stages of the enforcement stage," Evans said.

During the public comment period, two people who spoke at the conference by phone – Paul Gunter and David Lochbaum – criticized the NRC for a history of a lack of compliance and suggested the Oconee plant was unsafe.

"If the plant were not safe, we would have shut it down," Leeds said. "Safety isn't a stagnant endpoint. Safety is a continuous process."

Leeds added the NRC will continue to monitor Duke's process and may impose penalties as they go through the enforcement phase of the process.