Duke goes digital to enhance safety

THE JOURNAL STAFF

SENECA — Some very expensive equipment is already making its way to the Oconee Nuclear Station for what eventually will be a $250 million digital safety system upgrade to replace 1970s-era analog controls.

Duke Energy spokesperson Sandra Magee has been quoted saying that some of the new equipment is already on site for the change to a more modern system. Completion will be in 2011.

Federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) officials say the upgrade to replace analog controls is significant and represents the first of its kind among all U.S. nuclear plants.

Magee said she could not pinpoint a specific date for the switch to the new equipment because of the vigorous ongoing testing NRC officials require before the change takes place.

"Right now we're working on design to interface with the existing system," Magee told media outlets. "There will have to be a lot of testing."

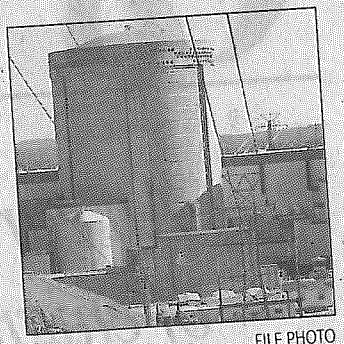
The upgrade would cover the entire safety-related control room systems at the Oconee Nuclear Station. NRC officials say that while the analog equipment continues to be reliable, the new equipment would be more modern and reliable by detecting instrument problems sooner and automatically through an online diagnostic system.

Duke Energy submitted a license amendment request to implement a digital computer based upgrade of the Reactor and Engineered Safeguard Protections Systems at the Oconee Nuclear Station in January 2008.

As is to be expected with government oversight of nuclear plants, the process has been methodical.

"We had to go through a lot of regulatory review," Magee said, adding that the upgrade should not impact customer rates because it is part of Duke's operating and maintenance expense.

carlos@dailyjm.com | (864) 973-6685



FILE PHOTO

Duke Energy is undergoing a $250 million digital upgrade to its safety systems at Oconee Nuclear Station.