Duke, local planners OK with nuke changes

BY MIKE EADS
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SENECA – Recent policy changes by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission shouldn't have much of an impact on local emergency planning for Duke Energy's Oconee Nuclear Station.

"The NRC governs the plants, but for us offsite it's the (Federal Emergency Management Agency) regulations that we have to follow and they've actually gotten harder," said Scott Krein, director of Emergency Management for Oconee County.

"With the new FEMA regulations, there are more things we will be evaluated on but a lot of them we were already doing," Krein said.

Those changes include stepped alert requirements for the station and the general public in case of a major equipment failure, fire or other serious incident.

Krein welcomes the NRC and FEMA changes, as they will expand the scope of emergency drills and planning.

Federal officials will be on hand at the station Sept. 18 for Duke's biannual drill with Oconee County emergency crews.

"Some of the new requirements will enhance the industry's emergency preparedness because it will test them better," said Krein, pointing out the new rules expand the scope of problems to be encountered during a drill. "It will make it easier to check and make sure the system is working."

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NUKE: The NRC released assessment of station in March

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Duke spokeswoman Sandra Magee pointed out her station's strong safety record and took exception to an Associated Press report Wednesday that nuclear emergency preparations have been weakened by the NRC.

"We will continue to have a large, full-scale exercise every two years that is evaluated by federal agencies. We will conduct this exercise for Oconee later this year," Magee said Thursday. "In addition, we hold quarterly drills with local emergency management agencies. This schedule hasn't changed. More scenarios have been added, including one that has a security focus instead of an operational safety focus."

The NRC released its annual assessment of Duke's Oconee station in March. The site was deemed safe for continued operation; however, it was noted that an "old design issue" is being addressed with the plant's standby shutdown systems.

Magee added that Duke is in constant contact with local and state agencies regarding emergency preparations. The company signed a Memorandum of Understanding with South Carolina officials in 2007 outlining each side's ongoing safety and communication roles, as well as who does what in the case of a nuclear emergency.

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The Oconee Nuclear Station will host biannual emergency response drills in September for plant and Oconee County personnel. Changes in federal regulations should enhance the value of the drills, according to Scott Krein, the county's Director of Emergency Management.

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