VOICES

THE GREENVILLE NEWS EDITORIAL

Duke takes positive steps on dam

Duke Energy's public proposals to mitigate the potentially catastrophic effects that could be caused if the 385-foot Jocassee Dam failed are an encouraging sign the the utility is moving forward to ensure the reactors at its Oconee Nuclear Station would be safe if such a disaster were to ever occur.

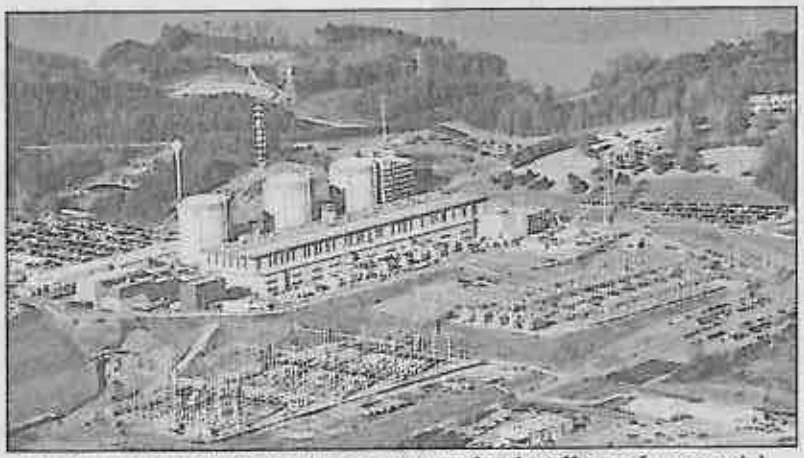
The company has had a long-running back-and-forth with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission over the level of danger the dam presents and how Duke should proceed to minimize that danger. The issue has become more public in the past year after a pair of whistleblowers began to speak out about inaction on the Jocassee Dam risks. Their concerns were borne out by some documents released this past spring by the NRC in response to a Freedom of Information Act request. They show a pattern of concerns being raised about the dam, then not being readily addressed by Duke, followed by a failure by the NRC to consistently follow up.

Recently, however, Duke shared its proposals to divert flood waters from the three nuclear reactors at the Oconee plant. The proposals will be formally submitted to the NRC in December, according to a report in *The Greenville News*. These developments represent real progress on what is an important, if seemingly remote concern.

Duke also is on schedule to complete other safety upgrades — one of which is a backup power system that would activate in the event of a flood. Duke has until 2016 to finish the upgrades and it expects to complete them on time, according to the newspaper report.

Far from a final resolution to this debate, the news is a positive sign that Duke and the NRC are at least on the same page and engaged in a productive dialog to assess the risks of a potential dam failure, as well as provide a way to neutralize the risks.

The NRC is happy with the progress that is being made on all fronts. "At this point we are very encouraged by what Duke is doing and very positive about how they're attacking this issue," Eric Leeds, director of the NRC's Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation, recently told *The News*.



Duke Energy is working on plans to prepare for the effects of a potential dam failure on its Oconee Nuclear Station, which sits downstream from the 385-foot Jocassee Dam. FILE/THE GREENVILLE NEWS

The proposals presented to protect against a catastrophic flood include a discharge diversion wall at the west end of the Keowee Dam and an isolation drain structure in the nuclear plant's turbine building to prevent water from rushing in; and "armoring" the east bank power block and intake dike south of the station. Another proposal, hardening the Keowee Dam with concrete, was ruled out.

A final determination on which option is best will come after the company finishes a flood hazard analysis, the newspaper reported. Duke said it will officially submit its plans in December, and a final proposal is due in March.

These improvements would be a step forward for the Oconee Nuclear Station. After an accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in Japan that was precipitated by an earthquake and tsunami, U.S. officials sought a review of how plants here would weather similar disasters. The odds of such a calamity are small, but the Fukushima disaster was not foreseen either.

It is vital for nuclear plants and regulatory officials to continually plan for potentially dangerous scenarios. One of the hallmarks of the U.S. nuclear industry has been its ability to learn from accidents overseas and apply the lessons learned to plants here. It is a reason that the U.S. nuclear industry has a very strong safety record.

Further, it is encouraging that Duke has now publicly recognized the need to make the needed upgrades. That the NRC was concerned about the potential overtopping or failure of the Jocassee Dam should have been justification enough for Duke to move forward quickly to develop plans to defend against a surge of water.

The whistleblowers who helped hold the company's and the NRC's feet to the fire and brought the issue to the forefront deserve some of the credit for moving these talks forward.

Residents in the Upstate who live close to the Oconee Nuclear Station deserve the peace of mind that Duke is moving forward. They also deserve the open, cordial accountability that the latest steps suggest might unfold.

We in South Carolina enjoy the ongoing benefits of inexpensive and reliable nuclear power, but in order for those electricity providers that rely on nuclear energy to be good neighbors, they must be open about the plants' risks and how those risks are addressed. Duke is now taking the right steps to keep the public informed. That spirit of openness and the cordiality between Duke and the NRC needs to continue.