

Group takes issue with nuke

Regulators, Duke dispute findings, say past problems never

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An environmental watchdog group has taken aim at Duke Energy and federal regulators for what it says were serious lapses in safety at Oconee Nuclear Sta-

tion and a pattern of "near-misses" at plants across the country that never should have been possible.

In its executive summary of a new report, the nonprofit Union of Concerned Scientists cites as its first reference the impotence of a backup cooling system dis-

covered last summer at the Oconee plant — an incident used to highlight what the group claims are reactor owners who "either tolerated known safety problems or took inadequate measures to correct them."

Duke Energy spokeswoman Sandra Magee said "Oconee is a

safe plant" and the problem that was fixed "posed no risk to the public."

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission reviewed the report and "objects strongly" to the characterization of 15 incidents across the country as "near-misses," NRC spokesman David McIntyre

plant's safety

posed risk to public

said.

The results of inspections have been publicized throughout the process, and nothing new appears in the union's report, McIntyre said.

"To call them near-misses is an

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exaggeration," he said. "We inspect plants every day. We are very open

about our oversight process."

The report — written by UCS' nuclear safety director David Lochbaum, who once trained federal regulatory inspectors — praises some of the federal Nucle-

ar Regulatory Commission's work but overall calls into question its effectiveness in enforcing regulations.

"The negative examples attest that the agency still has work to do to become

the regulator that the public deserves," Lochbaum said.

The 54-page report, titled "The NRC and Nuclear Power Plant Safety in 2011: Living On Borrowed Time," examines 15 special inspections reported by the NRC last year in response to "problems with safety equipment, security shortcomings and other troubling events at nuclear power plants."

Duke's Oconee station

plant gets first mention.

In 1983, a backup reactor core cooling system was installed — known as the "standby shutdown facility" — in response to the partial meltdown in 1979 of a reactor core at Three Mile Island, a "twin" station to Oconee both commissioned in the early 1970s, Lochbaum said.

Last June, "Workers discovered a problem with the system that would have rendered it useless in an accident," Lochbaum said.

The problem with heat breakers was "an immediate safety concern," but Duke took corrective measures, the NRC said in its inspection report.

However, the standby shutdown facility has never been needed, and the station has an alternate way to shut down the reactors in the case of an emergency, Magee said.

"The issue with the heat breakers posed no risk to the public," Magee said. "We have licensing requirements. If we did not meet them, we would not be in operation."

The Oconee plant has "redundancies" built in that ensure multiple levels of safety, Magee said.

Three NRC inspectors have full-time access to the station, and "they do a thorough job of inspecting our facilities," she said.

The UCS report cites successes by the NRC — such as its discovery at a plant in Illinois that a test tank routinely left partially filled with water could compromise safety during an earthquake — that it says shows that the agency is capable of enforcing regulations and identifying problems before special inspections are required.

While the NRC identified problems at various plants, the agency in its inspections would audit only a small sample of safety-related items, and deficiencies in the owners' testing and inspection regimes are found "only when the NRC forces owners to remedy those weaknesses," Lochbaum said.