Issues seen at Oconee

Nuclear plant operates safely, regulators say, after inspections following Japan crisis

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The Oconee Nuclear Station is among about a third of the nation's 104 reactors where recent inspections have found deficiencies, though federal officials said the plant is operating safely.

The issues include the potential loss of fire-protection sprinklers in an earthquake and the loss of water-level monitors for spent fuel pools if the plant were to lose power and its standby shutdown facility, according to federal documents reviewed by GreenvilleOnline.com.

"Oconee does have some issues that need to be resolved," said Andy Sabisch, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's senior resident inspector at Oconee, though adding there are "no show-stoppers."

Duke Energy spokeswoman Sandra Magee said nothing has been identified that would affect the safe operation of the facility.

The NRC ordered inspections at all plants after an earthquake and tsunami triggered radioactive releases at reactors in Japan. A federal directive last week requires plants to provide details

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reactors

on handling extreme events.

An NRC official was at Oconee on Monday with Sabisch to help determine new steps the industry may need to consider as lessons are learned from Japan.

Fighting fires

Even if sprinklers failed, Sabisch said, equipment and resources are available on site and from nearby fire departments to fight fires.

Current regulations don't require the sprinkler system to withstand an earthquake, Magee said.

Even if spent fuel pool levels can't be monitored, there are ways to get water into the pools, she said.

A system developed by a station worker would be triggered to spray water into the pools in an emergency, Sabisch said.

Dave Lochbaum, a nuclear safety engineer for the Union of Concerned Scientists, said the crisis in Japan will lead to the development of new ways to monitor water levels when instruments are unavailable.

Lochbaum cautioned against placing too much reliance on outside fire departments that probably would have their hands full in an earthquake severe enough to start a fire at the nuclear plant.

The recent inspections focused on maintenance of modifications made after the terrorist attacks in 2001 and examined multiple scenarios, Sabisch said.

He said some issues have already been addressed, citing actions taken regarding pumps, piping and venting strategies.



KEN OSBURN / Staff

Issues at Oconee Nuclear Station include firefighting equipment that could fail during an earthquake.

THE REPORT

Read the NRC's report on the Oconee plant and share your thoughts at this story at GreenvilleOnline.com.