NRC still assessing dam threat

Agency, Duke meet to discuss protection measures at Oconee

By Eric Connor
Staff writer
econnor@greenvilleonline.com

Nuclear regulators have yet to decide whether they agree with Duke Energy's assessment that a potential failure of the Jocassee Dam isn't a credible threat to the Oconee Nuclear Station and likely will wait until at least June to make a decision.

For the second time in two weeks, Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials met with the energy company to discuss its progress in reassessing the threat of a dam failure.

The meeting Tuesday in Maryland offered Duke a chance to explain to regulators how it plans to proceed with an integrated assessment that identifies vulnerabilities and develops modifications to protect against greater hazards.

In a March 25 meeting, Duke shared results from a flooding report ordered two years ago in the wake of the March 2011 tsunami-spawned nuclear meltdown in Fukushima, Japan.

Duke's re-evaluation of its flood protection concluded a dam failure wasn't a credible risk to the station's backup power system. The full re-evaluation report isn't available to the

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public.

For years, the NRC has expressed concern that a dam failure could overwhelm the 7½-foot flood wall that protects the backup system.

On Tuesday, NRC officials told Duke they hadn't committed to when they would respond. Duke had proposed a June deadline.

The potential for a dam failure that could overwhelm the nuclear station with floodwaters has come into sharp focus in the past several months.

NRC insiders and environmental groups have pointed to internal documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act that show a history of concern dating back to the 40-year-old station's early years.

The integrated assessment discussed Tuesday is one step in a process the NRC ordered to address flood concerns at plants across the country.

Last November, Duke completed a "walk-down" to ensure that design features to guard against flooding were in place and functional, said John Boska, Oconee project manager for the NRC's reactor regulation division.

The re-evaluation report was given to the NRC on March 12.

Duke proposed submitting an integrated assessment by October with a request to have the NRC rule on the report by February. The company said it will determine the scope of modifications to improve protection beyond its current design basis.

Both Duke and the NRC said they believe the plant is safe from flood in the meantime with interim "compensatory measures."

Duke told regulators Tuesday that its estimates project that floodwaters would inundate the station but that waters would remain below the power block.

Duke said modifications will also need to be made to protect against a spectacular rain event that the company said would dwarf any rainfall total ever recorded in the region.

The NRC and Duke will meet again today to discuss the company's long-overdue work on upgrading its fire-protection system.

Regulators have informed Duke of an "apparent violation" and are considering whether the company could face civil penalties for repeated delays.