New nuke safety measures proposed

Group: Changes needed at Oconee, other plants in light of Japan disaster

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A U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission task force is recommending changes at the Oconee Nuclear Station and at nuclear plants across the nation to add new protections as a result of what's being learned from the nuclear disaster in Japan.

The task force described current regulations and safety measures as a "patchwork."

The recommendations stem from recent inspections at U.S. plants and the events in Japan, said NRC spokesman Joey Ledford.

The task force is recommending new protections involving the potential loss of electrical power, earthquakes, flooding, spent fuel pool safety, venting of gases, and preparedness, Ledford said.

The recommendations have been sent to the NRC's five governing commissioners.

A series of public and agency briefings are scheduled in coming weeks before the commissioners decide whether to implement the recommendations, Ledford said.

Sandra Magee, spokeswoman for Duke Energy at Oconee Nuclear, said events in Japan have "been taken seriously by the whole industry."

Oconee has "already taken some actions in response to those events," and is "reviewing the report to look at particulars in areas where we need to focus," Magee said.

Duke will determine whether "additional enhancements" are needed "as we continue to learn from the Fukushima event," Magee said.

"What we are going to be diligent about is learning every lesson we can from the event to ensure the safe operation of Oconee," Magee said.

The task force recommends in a 90-page report "an enhanced regulatory framework that is logical,

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systematic, coherent, and better understood."

The report makes 12 recommendations to strengthen current regulatory protection "against natural disasters, mitigation, and emergency preparedness, and to improve the effectiveness of the NRC's programs."

The combination of the earthquake and the resulting tsunami that struck Japan is unlikely here, the task force said.

The group also said the continued licensing of U.S. nuclear plants and ongoing operations pose no risk to the public.

However "an accident involving core damage and uncontrolled release of radioactivity to the environment, even one without significant health consequences, is inherently unacceptable," the task force said.