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Nuclear Station reports groundwater contaminant

FOR THE JOURNAL

SENECA — Oconee Nuclear Station officials said Tuesday that an "aggressive investigation" is under way to determine the source of high tritium levels found in two monitoring wells near the plant.

Officials were quick to note that the high levels were found in monitoring wells, not drinking water wells and that the finding represents no threat to public safety.

Tritium is a rare radioactive hydrogen isotope.



FILE PHOTO

Duke Energy officials said Tuesday, there is no public health threat as a result of high levels of tritium found in two monitoring wells near Oconee Nuclear Station.

Duke Energy spokesperson Sandra Magee said samples from two wells, 13 feet apart, indicated that groundwater exceeded the nuclear industry's voluntary reporting level for tritium.

Magee said that nuclear regulators lowered the reporting level to 20,000 picocuries per liter in 2008, and that Duke agreed to voluntarily report any findings over that level. She said these are the first wells to produce reportable levels. Duke has 54 groundwater monitoring wells around its Oconee Nuclear Station.

"The Environmental Protection Agency has standards for public drinking supply, but these wells are not part of the plant's drinking water system," Magee said.

"There is no health risk to the public or plant employees or a violation of EPA standards since this water is not for consumption," said Dave Baxter, Oconee site vice

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president. "These monitoring wells are located on the site property near the main plant buildings. Other well samples show these tritium levels are confined to the plant property."

Magee said that tritium is a byproduct of reactor operations but that it is also found naturally in air and water.

The results from these samples were 24,400 and 35,400 picocuries per liter. Tritium must be ingested in large amounts to pose a significant health hazard, she said, adding that, while this water is not for drinking purposes, a person would have to drink two liters of this water per day for an entire year to receive a radiological dose of seven millirem. By comparison, Magee said, you would receive about 6-10 millirem from a routine chest x-ray. On average, individuals annually receive about 360 millirem from all sources, including background and medical sources of radiation.

S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control sampled residential wells around Oconee Nuclear Station in February 2008, and the results showed no detectable levels of tritium in the wells tested.

Duke Energy samples from surrounding monitoring wells indicate the tritium has not migrated off the plant site in groundwater.

"We have an aggressive, ongoing investigation in progress to determine the cause," said Baxter. "We have notified the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control of our recent findings and plan to keep the agency updated on our investigation and additional sampling."

Magee said the investigation will entail putting in more monitoring wells.