Nuclear anxiety emerges

Those living near Oconee reactors seek assurance

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SENECA — Bob and Charlotte Otto rarely thought about living near the nation's largest nuclear power plant in Arizona, but as they build a new home on the shore of Lake Keowee, in view of Oconee Nuclear Station's three reactors, Japan's nuclear crisis has made them pause.

"Is my home safe? When my grandchildren come to visit, are they safe?" they want to know.

Those were some of the questions they asked Tuesday night at a public meeting when U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials presented the annual assessment of Oconee's safety performance for the past year.

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Are you worried about living close to the Oconee Nuclear Station? Share your opinion with community leaders at Greenville Online.com.

These annual meetings are rarely well attended. Tuesday was different. More than 30 residents attended and asked questions for more than an hour, and Oconee and NRC officials responded.

David Browning also lives near the nuclear power plant and came to hear about what safety measures are in place in case of the unexpected. Cyber-security and spent fuel storage also were on his list of concerns.

David Wittnebert, president of Shelter Cove Homeowners Association, a nearby subdivision, came to listen and report back to his neighbors. He sees a parallel between what happened in Japan and shortcomings seen here when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast.

All of these residents said they still believe nuclear power is a safe, clean and reliable energy source. But they want reassurance that the nuclear power plant in their backyard is really safe, prepared to avoid the unthinkable.

Population has soared by more than 11 percent in the past decade in Oconee Nuclear Station's 10-mile emergency planning zone, and more residents are inquiring about safety here as Japan's nuclear crisis continues.

The numbers demonstrate the comfort level of residents as people continue to move to the area near the nuclear plant, said Sandra Magee, spokeswoman for Duke Energy, which owns and operates the Oconee station.

"They've taken that into consideration and still made the decision to purchase property in the emergency planning zone," she said.

Oconee Nuclear Station has seen a 32 percent increase in the number of calendars containing emergency information that are mailed each year to all homes, with the exception of apartment and post box addresses, in the 10-mile emergency planning zone. Oconee mailed out 30,837 calendars in 2000 and 40,642 calendars in 2010, Magee said.

Calls and visits from area residents with safety-related questions have increased since an earthquake and tsunami triggered radiation leakage at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi plant, Magee said.

"While they've known that Oconee operates here in their backyard, this has come more to the forefront of their mind and they're asking more questions," Magee said. "We haven't seen a significant increase, but we've seen some."

Callers primarily want to know more about emergency planning in general as well as how nuclear power works, back-up systems, and safe operation of the plant, Magee said.

Oconee's three-reactor complex met all safety requirements last year, NRC officials said.

All three Oconee units were under additional NRC oversight during 2010 because of safety concerns.

The NRC cited a failure to adequately maintain the plant's standby shutdown systems that can be used if normal and emergency systems are unavailable. Last December, the NRC completed inspections that determined the necessary corrective actions had been completed.

Another issue cited was human performance, especially as Oconee makes major improvements and upgrades for its next 20 years, said Bill Jones, the NRC's regional deputy director of reactor projects.

Should there be a need to rely on safety systems being enhanced at Oconee, the agency wants to know work was done properly, Jones said.

Preston Gillespie, Oconee site vice president, acknowledged the concern and said it is being addressed. The difference between a mistake at a nuclear plant and at other jobs is stressed to workers, he said.

Tom Clements, Southeastern nuclear campaign coordinator with Friends of Earth in Columbia, said problems like this "appear to have become chronic."

Concerns about safe operation of Oconee's aging reactors, in operation since the early 1970s, "will only increase over time," Clements said.

Meanwhile, federal inspectors are examining a new array of issues at all nuclear plants amid the continuing crisis in Japan, Jones said.

"We don't understand at this time the sequence of events, the action they took and how they got where they are," Jones said.

The NRC and America's nuclear industry are already looking at all operations to make sure that "mitigation equipment is in place, diesels will start and pumps will pump water wherever it needs to go," Jones said.

As the NRC and Duke Energy officials go through the process at Oconee, they are "looking at the response piece, also looking at our systems, making sure our equipment is ready, doing additional walk-downs, just taking that extra step to make sure the preparation is there that has always been there," Magee said. "We are taking every step to make sure there are no lessons missed from the Japanese situation," Magee said. "Planning for the unthinkable makes our industry stronger and safer, and examining the Japan event will help us do that."

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