Nuclear plant gets yellow flag for breaker problem



FILE PHOTO

The 38-year-old Oconee Nuclear Station was cited by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission this week for a safety issued related to the standby shutdown facility.

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SENECA — Another flag has gone up at Oconee Nuclear Station and this one is yellow.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has determined that electrical breakers installed in a key safety system would not have functioned during certain scenarios at the plant. As a result, a finding of "substantial safety significance" has been issued and ONS is in line for increased NRC inspections and oversight in the months ahead.

The new flag comes about one year after two other safety significance flags were lifted from the facility. This new flag will remain in effect until the NRC has determined whether the problem that prompted the regulatory action is an ongoing performance issue.

On June 2, Oconee employees determined that

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FLAG: 'Breakers were subsequently replaced'

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breakers essential to the standby shutdown facility would not have functioned if needed.

The standby shutdown facility is designed for reactor cooling during accident scenarios when other cooling systems might be unavailable or inoperable. The SSF has never been used in Oconee's 38-year operating history.

"The breakers were subsequently replaced with fuses that testing shows remain operable," said Victor McCree, NRC Region II administrator. "Throughout this process, Oconee continued to operate safely. However, this represents a significant problem involving a key safety system and warrants increased NRC inspection and oversight."

The public was never in danger because no actual event occurred. However, since the system is counted on for core cooling during accidents and the electrical breakers would not have functioned as needed, the facility was vulnerable if an accident had taken place.

At a Nov. 16 conference to discuss the issue, Duke argued that the breaker problem was, at worst, of low to moderate safety significance and did not represent a current performance issue.

The NRC review, however, determined that the finding was "yellow," or of substantial safety significance. The second violation, involving breakers that were installed to replace the original breakers, was classified as "green," or very low safety significance.

Duke spokeswoman Sandra Magee said the company will not appeal the NRC ruling and will continue to work with regulators who are scheduled to return to the plant in January to determine whether the breaker problem represents a current performance issue. Another NRC response will follow.

More information on the issue is available at the NRC website at www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/adams.html. The number to access the letter is ML11340A139.

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