Nuclear plant to see tighter oversight

Watchdog agency finds 'substantial' safety issue at Oconee facility

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SENECA — The Oconee Nuclear Station will receive greater federal oversight under a U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission decision that a blocked emergency waterline in one of its reactors created a substantial safety risk at the station on the shores of Lake Keowee.

The blocked emergency line, a four-month delay in checking Oconee's other two reactors after finding the problem in Unit 1, and an inaccurate technical report were among the issues considered by the NRC.

Duke said at a conference with agency officials that the situation posed little risk and shouldn't trigger added federal oversight.

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However, the federal agency found that Duke Energy's failure to ensure the standby shutdown systems remained operable had substantial safety significance and there will be more oversight.

The finding launches Oconee into a "yellow" category, the next-to-the-highest level of severity in the agency's color-coded system to categorize safety issues.

It's the first time since the agency began using the four-color system in 2000 that Duke has been cited on a yellow finding.

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NUKE

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At no time was there any threat to the safety of the public or workers at the plant, said Sandra Magee, a Duke spokeswoman.

Duke could have faced a civil penalty, in the form of a fine regarding the inaccurate technical report. However, the agency chose not to impose a penalty based on the plant's prior history and because the problem has been corrected, said Roger Hannah, an NRC spokesman.

Yellow findings are infrequent at the nation's nuclear plants, Hannah said. The findings against Oconee will result in at least 12 months of additional federal oversight and potentially other NRC actions, Hannah said.

Duke said its performance regarding operation of the system didn't meet Duke or NRC standards. The company doesn't plan to appeal the finding, Magee said. Oconee has taken corrective action and fixed the issue, Magee said.

Tom Clements, Southeastern nuclear campaign coordinator for Friends of Earth, said a safety significance issue of this level is "quite shocking and it should be disturbing to the public living in close proximity and downwind of the reactors."

If the line had been blocked in an emergency situation, "They can't properly cool down an abnormality in reactor performance," Clements said.

Magee said the lines that would drain water from the reactors only in highly unlikely emergency situations are only one of multiple backup systems at the facility that could be used.

"The standby shutdown facility has never been needed since it was installed," Magee said.

Oconee is adding another layer of backup that will further reduce reliance on the standby shutdown facility, Magee said.

A related finding of a failure to identify and correct degradation in the standby shutdown systems of Units 2 and 3 after the problem was identified in Unit 1 was determined to be "white," which indicates an issue of low to moderate safety significance and is less severe than yellow.

The three-unit Oconee plant, operated by Duke Energy, is located near Seneca, 30 miles west of Greenville.

The Greenville News 8/17/2010