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Nuclear regulators to host public meeting at Oconee Nuclear Station

By Anna Mitchell

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SENECA — Federal regulators will return to the Oconee Nuclear Station on April 9 to update the public on the plant's safety performance over the past year.

The meeting, which will include a public question-and-answer session, will begin at 6:30 p.m. at the Duke World of Energy building on the Rochester Highway outside Seneca.

Inspectors with the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission have taken on additional oversight of the Duke Energy plant's three reactors since a long-term deficiency in a key safety system was discovered last summer.

NRC inspectors found that the Oconee plant met all agency safety objectives during 2011, but ruled in December that Oconee had an "old design issue" with its standby shutdown systems because of a set of breakers that would trip if exposed to high heat.

These systems would be used to safely shut down the plant's three nuclear reactors if normal and emergency systems were unavailable. After months of meetings and discussion with Duke officials, the NRC on Dec. 6 ruled that the problem merited a "yellow" finding, meaning a substantial risk to safety.

The standby shutdown facility, in a concrete building away from the plant's three containment towers, is supposed to provide 72 hours of power to reactors in a total blackout — possible if hydropower lines from Lake Keowee and lines from outside the area were somehow cut off.

Inspectors spent many hours ensuring that the Oconee plant met federal safety requirements and protected people living near the plant and the overall environment, said Victor McCree, an NRC regional administrator based in Atlanta.

NRC inspectors have also looked at whether any immediate safety concerns exist at Oconee and other plants in the United States in light of the March 2011 events at the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant in Japan. Those reviews found that the plants remain safe but will require some modifications.

Regulators issued several orders March 12 to nuclear plants across the nation that address Fukushima-related safety concerns. Among those was an order that requires plants to install enhanced spent-fuel pool instrumentation.

"During the events in Fukushima, responders were without reliable instrumentation to determine water level in the spent fuel pool," according to one of the March 12 orders. "This caused concerns that the pool may have boiled dry, resulting in fuel damage.

Numerous attempts were made to refill the spent fuel pools, which diverted resources and attention from other efforts."

A letter sent from the NRC Region II office to plant officials will serve as the basis for the April 9 meeting at Oconee. The letter can be viewed on the NRC website.



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