

Nuke inspection finds

Duke says problem with breakers noted by NRC has been corrected

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Inspectors have found that breakers needed in emergency backup systems at Oconee Nuclear Station, 30 miles from

Greenville, would have failed under potential heat buildup, according to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The problem, involving pressurizer heater breakers, has "potentially greater than low safety signifi-

cance," according to a letter from the agency to Oconee officials.

The breakers inside pressurizer heaters located inside the reactor building are part of safety equipment controlled from a standby shutdown facility to maintain cooling in an emergency.

The problem isn't a public safety concern and has

been corrected, said Sandra Magee, a Duke Energy spokeswoman.

The pressurizer heater breakers have been replaced with fuses and fuse boxes that have been thoroughly tested, Magee said.

Duke "identified the potential problem with the breakers as part of an engineering review to confirm functionality of other

safety flaw

breakers located outside the reactor building," Magee said. "This prompted us to revisit the breakers inside the reactor building."

The breakers "may not withstand the expected 267° Fahrenheit temperature inside containment due to the loss of containment cooling" during station blackout and seismic-

induced turbine building flooding, according to the NRC document.

A thermal overload feature would have caused the breakers to open prematurely under elevated containment temperature, the document states.

The problem was "an immediate safety con-

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cern," but Duke has taken corrective measures, according to the document.

The standby shutdown facility has never been needed, and there is an alternate way to shut down the reactors should an emergency situation arise, Magee said.

Tom Clements, former director of the Nuclear Control Institute and regional nuclear campaign coordinator for Friends of the Earth, said, "Degradation in operation of the system to safely cool the reactors in case of emergency

is very troubling."

Discovery of problems at Oconee have "become chronic," Clements said.

"The NRC is to be congratulated for keeping a closer eye on Oconee at a time when both the NRC and utilities are under greater scrutiny nationwide to safely regulate and operate the nuclear reactor fleet."

Duke Energy officials have 30 days to present their case before the NRC makes an official determination of safety significance and any added oversight.

"We are still reviewing the report at this time," Magee said.