Nuke plant gets clean safety check

NRC review doesn't ease critics' concerns over aging, storage

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SENECA — Rita Meigs, who lives close to Oconee Nuclear Station on Lake Keowee, doesn't worry about the safety of the Duke Energy facility and wasn't surprised that Oconee will get good marks in its upcoming annual performance review by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

"I've found nuclear facilities to be very safe," said Meigs, who sold personal protective equipment and consulted in that industry for more than 20 years and has visited numerous nuclear facilities.

No significant concerns arose at Oconee during 2009, according to the NRC assessment to be presented at a public review at 6:30 p.m. today and open house until 8 p.m. at the World of Energy at the nuclear station off State 130 north of Seneca.

At a time when Oconee, like many of the nation's nuclear plants, is aging, and construction of a new generation of nuclear facilities — including plans for a new Duke plant in Cherokee County — are being debated, watchdogs such as Tom Clements of Columbia have concerns they don't want the general public to ignore.

"Despite claims by the NRC that in general the nuclear fleet around the nation has been operating safely, the issue of aging is of growing concern as time goes on," said Clements, who is Southeastern nuclear campaign coordinator for Friends of Earth. "The stress and strain of radiation and high pressure is causing wear and tear

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of the plants that could lead to more likelihood of accidents."

The discovery of radioactive tritium in two monitoring wells at Oconee, recently reported by *The Greenville News*, and a buildup of spent fuel rods stored at the plant are two of Cements' specific concerns.

Sandra Magee, a Duke spokeswoman, said radioactive tritium found earlier this year in two of 54 monitoring wells at Oconee is "very isolated to a specific area" and poses no health risk to workers or the public. To this point, the leaks are below regulatory limits and deemed by the NRC to be of low safety significance, said Roger Hannah, an NRC spokesman.

Clements said he also believes the NRC and general public need to be more diligent about spent fuel storage and the buildup of high-level nuclear waste on the site until the issue of a national repository is resolved.

"The commission will continue to evaluate the high-level waste issue," Hannah said. And the commission is "well aware" that plants are aging and looks carefully at equipment and programs to address aging issues in the license renewal process and ongoing evaluations, he said.

The Oconee plant met all NRC safety objectives during 2009, and performance for all three units was at a level that will require no additional NRC oversight, according to NRC documents.