Nuke plants asked for disaster plan

Federal agency wants all facilities to detail response to 'extreme events'

By Anna Simon
CLEMSON BUREAU
asimon@greenvilleonline.com

SENECA — A federal directive has been issued to the Oconee Nuclear Station and all of the nation's nuclear plants to provide details on how they would handle "extreme events."

The new directive, contained in a bulletin from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, follows the March 11 earthquake and tsunami that triggered the ongoing release of radioactivity from Japan's Fukushima Dai-ichi plant.

The NRC has issued instructions to show how the plants are complying with requirements to deal with the potential loss of large areas of the plant after extreme events that could quickly disable safety systems, Scott Burnell, an NRC spokesman in Washington, told GreenvilleOnline.com.

The new directive is in addition to earlier NRC inspections required at all nuclear plants following the crisis in Japan. It demands that the plants provide information about all of their mitigating strategies, and builds on the inspections of some but not all aspects, Burnell said.

PLANNING AHEAD
Read the NRC's directive and share your thoughts about nuclear power plants in the comments section with this story at GreenvilleOnline.com.

While the new NRC directive includes no direct reference to acts of terrorism, it "looks at the kinds of things that were added in the months and years following 2001" that required nuclear plants to have strategies in place to address events like a terrorist attack, said Roger Hannah, a spokesman in the NRC regional office in Atlanta.

"It is looking at how the plant would respond to extreme events regardless of what the cause was," Hannah said.

The NRC bulletin comes less than two weeks after the death of Osama bin Laden.

Since March 11, "We have been re-verifying our ability to withstand extreme events," said Sandra Magee, spokeswoman for Duke Energy, which owns and operates the three-reactor Oconee station.

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Oconee, on the shore of Lake Keowee about 30 miles from Greenville, is one of the nation's largest nuclear power plants and is in the midst of upgrades to prepare for its next 20 years after being the nation's second plant to be relicensed.

Oconee "will provide detailed information to confirm that our mitigation strategies are adequate and comprehensive," Magee said.

Site reviews conducted since March 11 will be a part of Oconee's response to this latest requirement, as will any items identified in the early reviews following the event in Japan that need corrections, Magee said.

Eric Leeds, director of the NRC's Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation, said the goal is to make sure reactors can maintain the ability to cool reactor cores and spent fuel in storage pools, as well as maintain the integrity of containment structures if areas of the plant were destroyed by an explosion or fire.

Plants have until June 10 to respond.