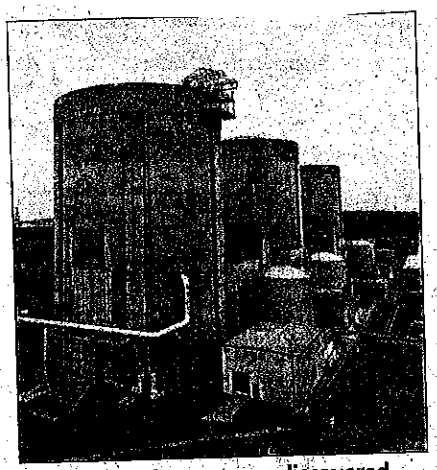
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The crack at Oconee was discovered last November. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

Oconee Nuclear may face penalties for leak

The owner of the Oconee Nuclear Station says it has "additional information" that will provide more insight into a radioactive leak at the plant that forced a shutdown and prompted nuclear regulators to warn the company of a potential violation of safety standards.

Duke Energy declined to discuss details ahead of a conference with the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission July 31 to determine whether the company should be cited for a crack at Oconee's oldest reactor.

"Duke has reviewed the NRC's assessment of the event and has some additional information that we believe impacts their evaluation," Duke spokeswoman B.J. Gatten said.

"This regulatory conference gives us the opportunity to discuss that information with the NRC. We will not comment on our position until after the regulatory conference."

The NRC said it will wait until after the conference to decide if Duke should be penalized.

The Greenville News first reported on the November 2013 leak that led to the shutdown of Oconee's Unit 1 – at age 40 the oldest of the station's three reactors operating on Lake Keowee.

In a notice to Duke Energy, the NRC said that the company failed to identify a crack in the reactor's "high pressure injection system," which would provide water to cool the reactor in the event of an accident.

The agency issued an "apparent violation" and ordered a conference in Atlanta on July 31.

"There was no immediate safety concern because the crack was repaired, but the NRC determined that the method used by the plant to check for cracks did not provide acceptable coverage as required and did not identify the crack before it began leaking," the NRC said.

Duke has improved its inspection procedures to prevent similar problems in the future, Gatten said.

The leak was considered small — less than one-tenth of a gallon per minute — and was limited to the secure confines of the containment building, Gatten said.

The NRC classified the apparent violation as "greater than green."

The agency evaluates regulatory performance at commercial nuclear power plants with a graduated, color-coded system — green, white, yellow or red.

The November crack is the second apparent violation the company

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has faced in the past year, when regulators threatened civil fines for the company's repeated missed deadlines in updating fire-protection standards.

The NRC later classified the violation as "white." The agency declined to impose civil fines but ordered Duke to adhere to a strict deadline to update protection standards by November 2016.

"We are on track to meet that November 2016 commitment date," Gatten said.

Oconee has avoided the fate of some of America's aging reactors that have been shut down over the past decade, but a U.S. Government Accountability Office report showed that over that time the station has required among the highest levels of scrutiny in the industry because of ongoing safety concerns.