OCONEE REACTOR SHUT DOWN

Plant now operating on one of three units

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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SENECA — One of the three nuclear units at the Oconee Nuclear Station was manually shut down early Thursday morning after indicators showed control operators the feedwater flowing through the unit was outside the normal range.

Duke Energy Spokeswoman B.J. Gatten said the shutdown of Unit No. 3 was a "conservative decision" and that there was no danger to the community and no loss of power for Upstate customers. She said

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'They tried to stabilize it, and when they were unable to stabilize it in the normal manner, they decided to make a conservative decision and go ahead and shut the unit down to address the problem.'

B.J. Gatten
Duke Energy spokeswoman



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The Oconee Nuclear Station was operating Thursday with only one of its three nuclear reactor units online. One was manually shut down Thursday, while another is in the midst of a planned outage. An official said service to customers was not affected and the community was in no danger.

REACTOR: 'We still don't know the cause'

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workers were still investigating the cause of the problem and there was no indication Thursday afternoon when the unit would be brought back online.

"The unit was manually tripped (Thursday) morning when the control operators manually identified fluctuations in feedwater control indicators outside of the normal operating range," Gatten said. "They tried to stabilize it, and when they were unable to stabilize it in the normal manner, they decided to make a conservative decision and go ahead and shut the unit down to address the problem. We still don't know the cause of the problem, but that's something we do to keep the plant in as safe a condition as we can."

The shutdown was the first manual tripping of one of the Oconee units since August 2010 and the first shutdown of Unit No. 3 since 2009. Unit No. 2 is currently shut down because of a planned outage. Gatten said other Duke plants are supplying needed electricity so that customers are not affected.

"It's an integrated system, and we've got plants all over that can provide the needed power for the Upstate," she said.

Gatten said the feedwater indicators show operators how much water is flowing into the steam generators.

"The steam generators are what produce the steam," she said. "You have to have that steam flowing in. Those indicators didn't show us the right flow of water. It doesn't mean there was no water, just that the water wasn't flowing in the right amounts. That's why they decided to shut it down.

"We don't even know that the flows were wrong," she added. "The indicators appeared to be showing it. It's kind of like on your car, the light comes on and it may mean that something's up, but it may just mean the light is burning out. We don't know the reason. It may have been that nothing was wrong except the indicator light was showing a problem."

Gatten said operators will not bring the unit back online until the issue is resolved.

"They want to find the problem first and then fix the problem before they bring it back up," she said. "Bringing a nuclear unit back up is not as quick a process as taking it down. You can take it down in less than a second, but it takes a little bit longer to bring it back up. It kind of depends on if they find something, and they may want to take their time in bringing it up. It also depends on the status of the system how quickly you can bring it up. If there are other things they've been wanting to work on, they may decide to keep it down a day and get it done all at once."

Joey Ledford, a spokesman for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), which oversees nuclear plants, said the commission's resident Oconee inspector was notified of the issue on his way to work Thursday morning.

"Early indications are that it was relatively uncomplicated, but we'll still have to review it to be sure," he said. "We look into it to see if there was any kind of error in decision-making or any kind process or code that wasn't followed. That's something that we would determine down the road. At this point, it looks like they did what they were supposed to do, but we won't know until they've completed the review."

ncannada@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6684
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