Oconee faulted on its disaster documents

NRC says guides for reactor operators in wrong place, outdated

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The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission said an inspection of the Oconee Nuclear Station found that guidelines that reactor operators are supposed to follow in a disaster of the magnitude that struck Japan weren't kept in critical areas and other copies were outdated.

The sole copy of Oconee's Severe Accident Management Guidelines in Duke Energy's emergency operations facility in Charlotte also was outdated, according to results of NRC inspections carried out at the nation's 104 reactors in the wake of the crisis in Japan.

It was the second round of inspections and the second time the NRC cited concerns at Oconee.

The initial inspections found an issue with a vent line in one of Oconee's three reactor buildings.

The line is for use in an extreme emergency, and the problem has been resolved, Oconee plant officials said.

The latest inspections checked on availability of guidelines that were voluntarily put in place by the industry in the 1990s at the request of the NRC and periodically updated to protect the public by containing or reducing the impact of accidents that damage a reactor core.

"We have taken the information that the NRC shared with us and have addressed those issues where the procedures needed to be relocated or updated," said Duke spokeswoman Sandra Magee.

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The guidelines were in the control room area, rather than in the immediate horseshoe area of the control room, Magee said.

"They were right next to the control room. These were simple adjustments that we could make very easily and just some fine-tuning we could make in our document-management system."

While the chance of the multiple failures such as those that occurred at Japan "is remote," the guidelines need to be readily accessible and current, said Andy Sabisch, senior resident engineer for the NRC at Oconee.

"When you do need them, that's not the time to be thinking them through," said Sabisch, who was working at Three Mile Island in 1979 when a cooling problem caused a partial meltdown.

Sabisch said that had there been an extreme emergency, Oconee and Duke officials could have resolved the issue with the guidelines quickly, long before the information would have been needed.

Japan didn't have similar guidelines in place at its nuclear plants, Sabisch said.

U.S. plants have general operating procedure guidelines, abnormal operating guidelines, emergency operating guidelines and severe situation guidelines in place for use as an incident deteriorates beyond situations the plants are designed to withstand, he said.