

Oconee nuke equipment

NRC sends inspectors after finding breakers that didn't work perfectly

By Woody White
and David Dykes
STAFF WRITERS

Special inspectors sent by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission are evaluating "degraded" equipment

at Oconee Nuclear Station's standby shutdown facility.

The standby facility is intended for use when regular and emergency reactor cooling systems aren't available, "almost a backup

to a backup," NRC spokesman Roger Hannah told GreenvilleOnline.com.

Hannah said it "does not appear to be a serious safety issue, based on our initial analysis." He said "degraded" is a nuclear plant term used when equipment doesn't perform perfectly every time during testing.

"It may be slow. It may

work two times out of three," he said. "It means you couldn't be 100 percent sure it would work when you needed it."

Tom Clements, Southeastern nuclear campaign coordinator for Friends of the Earth in Columbia, said the NRC identified a problem "of potentially serious concern" at Oconee, relat-

under review

ing to possible inability to provide reactor cooling water in case of certain accidents, "but evidently has not required immediate correction of it."

"Prudence dictates that the problem be immediately corrected and any managerial or training problems addressed in order to protect public health and safe-

ty in the event of a serious accident," he said.

Clements said it appears the NRC "may be caving in" to Duke's aim to keep the Oconee units operating at full power and the agency "is not being the vigilant regulator it should be in the aftermath of the Fukushi-

See **NUKE** on page 3A

THURSDAY, JULY 7, 2011 THE GREENVILLE NEWS

greenvilleonline.com 3A

NUKE

FROM PAGE 1A

ma disaster (in Japan)."

"This new problem reveals that expanded NRC oversight at Oconee is needed," he said.

Hannah said there was no immediate safety concern, and the standby facility only would be used "in certain, extreme accident scenarios."

If a safety issue existed, "We would take immediate action up to, and including, having the units shut down if that were required," he said.

Oconee plant employees determined their test of the facility's pressurizer heater breakers on June 24 wasn't successful and the breakers were declared operable but degraded, the NRC said.

Sandra Magee, spokes-

woman for Duke Energy, which operates the nuclear plant about 30 miles from Greenville, said the problem could have caused the breakers to trip if there were high temperatures in the reactor building.

"We are currently working with an independent test facility to find alternate breakers that would not be sensitive to elevated temperatures during a shutdown. Once we identify these appropriate replacement breakers, we will install them," Magee told GreenvilleOnline.com.

Hannah said the degraded breakers are "similar" to the ones people might find in their fuse box at home, but "obviously larger. They are similar in terms that they connect and break an electrical connection."

The standby shutdown facility was designed for reactor cooling during accident scenarios that include fires and severe storms

that might render other cooling systems unavailable or inoperable, the NRC said.

The standby shutdown facility "has never been used, never been needed," Magee said. She said the breakers weren't original equipment. "They were added in recent years," she said.

Andy Sabisch, senior resident inspector at Oconee for the NRC, said Duke officials in early June identified breakers that might not be able to provide power under all conditions.

New breakers were installed that eliminated the potential "for them to trip open" at elevated temperatures, he said. Additional breakers of the type purchased by Duke were sent to a testing facility, where the breakers failed at elevated temperatures, Sabisch said.

That required additional action by Duke officials,

who have come up with training, modified plant procedures "and are working through finding suitable replacements that, in fact, will not trip at elevated temperatures," Sabisch said.

The NRC said a five-member special inspection team likely would spend about a week at Oconee gathering facts and evaluating Duke Energy's response.

NRC officials said the team is led by Joe Austin, the senior resident inspector at the Shearon Harris nuclear power plant southwest of Raleigh.

The team also will assess Duke Energy's revised operating procedures related to the facility and operators' training and capabilities to implement the procedures, the NRC said.

The NRC said it would issue a report within 45 days of its completion of the inspection.

Inspectors sent to Oconee

'Degraded' condition found in emergency shutdown system

THE JOURNAL STAFF

SALEM — The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has dispatched a special inspection team to Oconee Nuclear Station to evaluate an issue related to the plant's standby shutdown

facility. The back-up control room facility is intended for use when regular and emergency reactor cooling systems are not available.

On June 24, ONS plant employees determined that testing on the standby shutdown facil-

ity pressurizer heater breakers was not successful and the breakers were declared operable but degraded.

The standby shutdown facility is designed to be used for reactor cooling during accident scenarios, including fires and

severe storms, where other cooling systems might be unavailable or inoperable.

Oconee Nuclear spokeswoman Addie Bradshaw explained that the breakers proved sensitive under certain circumstances to increased temperatures and were thrown, much like a breaker in a home would respond.

She said plant personnel

Nuclear

immediately determined an alternative method for safely shutting down the Oconee units during an emergency without relying on these particular heater breakers, and then ran scenarios on the control room simulator to verify the shutdown method would be successful.

SEE NUCLEAR, PAGE A5



FILE PHOTO

A special inspection team from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is at Oconee Nuclear Station this week attempting to determine the status of degraded breakers in the emergency cooling system of the plant.

NUCLEAR: 'We welcome the NRC inspection into our response'

FROM PAGE A1

"We also re-verified the accuracy of the emergency shutdown procedures and reviewed these procedures with plant operators," she noted.

Joey Ledford, public affairs officer for the NRC, said the special inspection team will determine the facts surrounding the degraded condition and evaluate Duke Energy's response to that condition. The team will also assess Duke's revised operating procedures related to the facility as well as operators' training and capabilities to implement those procedures.

"We welcome the NRC inspection into our response and to the identifying procedure we used," Bradshaw said.

She added that ONS is working with an independent test facility to identify alternative breakers to install in the standby shutdown facility.

ONS was removed from the NRC's "yellow" threshold — an indication of a significant safety performance issue — in December after being on the agency's watch list for most of 2010.

NRC onsite inspector Andy Sabisch told local residents in April that the yellow finding stemmed from water flow problems in a back-up cooling system that rendered the system inoperable for all three reactors for more than a year. The water line in question has not been used in the plant's 40 years of operation.

The plant is still undergoing additional oversight as a result of four separate violations for which the NRC said the "underlying cause was human error in failure to follow operating procedures."

Duke spokesperson Sandra Magee said in April that the four violations were diverse — ranging from fire brigade performance to how rebar was being handled in the pouring of concrete — but centered largely around the ongoing construction of a protected service water system.

The current special inspection began Tuesday and is expected to continue throughout the week.

The NRC will issue a report within 45 days of the completion of the inspection.