

HEIDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

Oconee Nuclear sits amid thousands of homes and high-end developments.

Oconee nuke in cancer study

Latest tools will update earlier research that found no risk near plants

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For people living near nuclear power plants, there has been the nagging concern about radiation and cancer risk.

During the five decades that nuclear reactors have dotted the nation's landscape, however, there's been no science to shake the confidence of federal oversight agencies on safety.

Regulators relied on a 1990 National Cancer Institute study of cancer deaths in counties that had nuclear facilities, which found no statistical difference between areas with reactors and those without, said Scott Burnell of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Now the government is going to take another look, and one place they're going to examine is the area around the Oconee Nuclear Station, a three-reactor Duke Energy complex near Seneca.

Reggie Turetzky thinks it's a good idea for at least a couple of reasons.

See STUDY on page 13A

She's a cancer survivor. And she lives in the shadows of the Oconee plant at Keowee Key.

"Having been a cancer survivor, I think it's an excellent idea," she said.

"Before we moved here, we called the NRC and wanted to make sure that this was a safe plant," said Turetzky, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1991 and moved to Lake Keowee three years later.

Newer analytical tools and information, including databases on cancer diagnoses rather than deaths, and the ability to examine smaller geographical areas, have been developed in the past two decades, and the NRC wants a new study, Burnell said.

The agency has asked the National Academy of Sciences to conduct the new study, and a committee of experts is being selected for the first phase, which will determine how to conduct it. The second phase will be the actual study.

While the nuclear industry supports the study, its leaders said nuclear power plants pose no risk to public health and safety.

Radiation exposure "is strictly regulated and is controlled at levels that are just a fraction of federal radiation safety standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency and the NRC," said Steve Kerekes, spokesman for the Nuclear Energy Institute, an industry organization.

"There is an abundance of precaution that is taken to be sure public health is protected," Kerekes said. Prior health studies "have shown no adverse health effects."

He said it's appropriate for the nation to update the research. "The better understanding we can get of safety associated with nuclear power operations is welcomed," Kerekes said.

Duke Energy monitors air, water, ground water, vegetation, fish, and samples of milk produced at local diaries, and results show no reason for concern, said Bill Foster, spokesman for Duke Energy.

Most of the information on releases comes from the German and other European studies, which he believes provide evidence of elevations in childhood cancer, particularly leukemia.

Yet many studies, including the German study, link childhood cancers to nuclear plants but assume that releases were insufficient to cause them, leading some researchers to conclude that there's "no explanation," Wing said.

Wing also said he is concerned about increased risk as the nation's nuclear power plants age. "This is an issue now across the United States," Wing said.

The Centers for Disease Control and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry have no record of any health risk assessments or site work in the area of Oconee Nuclear Station in the past 10 to 15 years, said Bernadette Burden, a CDC spokeswoman.

The new National Academy of Sciences study "will be very challenging" because the nation's nuclear plants have been in operation for decades and people have moved in and out of the surrounding communities, population numbers have changed, and plant operations have changed, Crowley said.

> **"What you are seeing is a generally understood need to take a look at this issue again."**
> Kevin Crowley, study manager

That's why the first phase will determine how the study should be conducted, Crowley said.

Public involvement is an important part of the process. Nominations to the study committee are now being taken, and "any names received will be taken very seriously," Crow-

cern, said Sandra Magee, spokeswoman at the Oconee plant, which is ringed by thousands of homes and high-end developments.

Jim Warren, executive director of NC WARN, a North Carolina-based nuclear watchdog group, said few health studies have been done, so there's little real knowledge of the impact of "routine emissions" from nuclear plants into the air and water and leakage of tritium and other radioactive materials underground.

A German study that found high rates of childhood leukemia near a nuclear power plant and a neighboring nuclear research operation raise questions for Warren and for Kevin Crowley, who will be the project manager for the National Academy of Sciences study.

"What you are seeing is a generally understood need to take a look at this issue again. I think that's why the Nuclear Regulatory Commission came to us," he said.

Warren said the German study calls "the whole issue of acceptable limits" into question.

"There are well documented routine planned releases and unplanned releases that create potential exposures to the public, so I think this National Academies study is very important to try to get a better understanding about what the risks are and what kind of health damage might already be occurring," Warren said.

Dr. Steve Wing, an epidemiologist at the University of North Carolina who testified before the National Academy of Sciences during the NRC's request for the new study, said the best current evidence about cancer risk from routine nuclear power plant re-



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ley said. He said if people have information they think would be useful to the panel, "we would be very pleased to receive it."

A website, http://dels.nas.edu/global/nrsb/CancerRisk, contains information about the study and includes directions for submitting nominations and criteria to be used to screen nominations.

People who want to receive electronic updates on the study can e-mail crs@nas.edu.

About four public meetings will be held during the first phase, and one probably will be in Atlanta, which would be the closest location to the Upstate. A date will be set after the committee is formed. The meetings will be webcast so people also can watch online, Crowley said.

At the end of the first phase, a report will be released to the public, and feedback will be solicited to design the second phase.