Oconee nuke plant passes safety check

US facilities may be subject to new standards in wake of Japan crisis

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A federal review of the Oconee Nuclear Station shows that the three-reactor complex met all safety requirements last year while federal inspectors are examining a new array of issues at all nuclear plants amid the continuing drama in Japan.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's review of the station on the shores of Lake Keowee shows that it met all of the current safety benchmarks. That may be a moving target going forward, however, because of the events in Japan.

Some added inspections already are underway at Oconee and at all of the nation's 64 nuclear power plants as a result of what's being learned in Japan, Andy Sabisch, the NRC's senior resident inspector at Oconee, told GreenvilleOnline.com

A spokeswoman for Duke Energy, which owns and operates the Oconee station, said the NRC review validates the plant's safety.

"Operating safely every day is our responsibility and one we take seriously," spokeswoman Sandra Magee said.

The NRC is focusing on new inspection plans for this year, including examinations related to spent fuel storage and the maintenance of reactor cooling systems — major elements of the crisis in Japan.

Sabisch said plans for those inspections on fuel storage and cooling were laid before the earthquake

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and tsunami that damaged the Fukushima Da-ichi plant in Japan.

The NRC is evaluating equipment, procedures, training and plant structures at all stations, Sabisch said. The information from those inspections will be part of a presidential report.

Operator licensing examinations also will be conducted this year, and NRC staffers will continue to review ongoing modifications to the plant, the agency said.

All three Oconee units were under additional NRC oversight during the period because of an inspection that raised safety concerns.

The NRC cited a failure to adequately maintain the plant's standby shutdown systems that can be used if normal and emergency systems are unavailable. Last December, the NRC completed inspections that determined the necessary corrective actions had been completed.

A public meeting will be held Tuesday at Duke Energy's World of Energy on Rochester Highway in Seneca, beginning at 6:30 p.m. NRC staffers will answer questions from the public.