Oconee officials unsure of leak's cause

BY NORMAN CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — A reactor at the Oconee Nuclear Station remained shut down Tuesday and will likely be offline for at least a few days while officials work to find the cause of a leak inside a containment building.

Unit No. 1 was shut down early Monday morning, the second shutdown of an Oconee reactor in the past three weeks.

Duke Spokeswoman B.J. Gatten said Tuesday afternoon that the "root cause" has not yet been identified and repairs have not been made.

"We're going to find exactly what caused the problem before we try to start fixing anything," Gatten said.

Gatten said the radioactive leak was less than one-tenth of a gallon per minute and was inside the secure containment building, meaning it posed no safety threat to the community. She said operators shut down the reactor "out of an abundance of caution."

Roger Hannah, a spokes-

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man for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), said the NRC will likely decide later this week whether to initiate a follow-up inspection because of the incident.

"We've got analysts looking at it to see if it trips any of the thresholds for more involved follow-up inspection," he said. "That could range from just sending one additional inspector for a few days to several inspectors, and we haven't reached that point yet.

"There are no immediate safety concerns; it's shut down," Hannah added. "They're looking at what they need to do to isolate the leak and to make repairs or whatever they are going to do. If there's additional information that we need, we may do some sort of follow-up inspection."

The incident came less than three weeks after Unit No. 3 was manually shut down for several days after leaking seals on a valve actuator prevented the valve from working properly and caused fluctuating flows of feedwater into the unit. That shutdown was the first one at the Oconee plant since August 2010. Gatten said Unit No. 3 is operating at full power. Unit No. 2 is currently shut down in a planned outage for refueling.

Hannah said it does not appear that the two recent shutdowns are any cause for alarm.

"Unless there are overlapping causes, it really doesn't affect one or the other," he said. "If it had been on the same unit, it may get to a point where it may trip a performance indicator."

He added that the leak in the containment building is "not something that is uncommon."

"To use the analogy of a car, you can do absolutely perfect maintenance on a car and still have a small leak somewhere," Hannah said. "In a system as sophisticated as a reactor system, you may get small leaks from time to time."



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Duke Energy officials are still investigating the cause of a leak that forced the shutdown of a reactor at Oconee Nuclear Station on Monday. A Nuclear Regulatory Commission spokesman said the NRC is likely to decide later this week whether it will schedule a follow-up inspection.

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