Oconee reactor back online

Leaking valve repaired; no safety threat, Duke says

By Eric Connor
Staff writer

One of Oconee Nuclear Station's three atomic reactors has resumed service after a malfunction caused an unplanned shutdown four days ago.

Duke Energy began powering the reactor up over the weekend, and full power was reached on Monday, company spokeswoman B.J. Gatten said.

A leaking valve operator disrupted how water flowed through the reactor's steam-generation system, leading to a shutdown last Thursday.

The valve has since been repaired, and the malfunction in Unit 3 wasn't considered a safety threat, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission spokesman Roger Hannah said.

The shutdown of Unit 3 left Oconee with only one operating reactor during repair.

A second reactor, Unit 2, has been offline since Oct. 12 for scheduled refueling, according to an NRC reactor status report.

In that time, Gatten said, Duke has relied on "a diverse fleet of power generating stations." She said the outages won't affect ratepayers' bills and won't interrupt service.

The NRC isn't planning to explore whether the malfunctions could occur at the other two reactors, and the agency didn't identify any violations, Hannah said.

"The licensee will have to determine if it is a potential problem on the other units," Hannah said. "We are not conducting inspections for that at this time because these are not safety-related valves and have negligible contribution to plant risk."

Oconee engineers are using the refueling shutdown of the second reactor to inspect the same equipment that malfunctioned on Unit 3, Gatten said.

"As far as Unit 1, we have implemented additional monitoring of the same component to allow us to identify any indications of changing conditions

See OCONEE, Page 5B

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Continued from Page 1B

with the feedwater valve," she said.

Oconee will perform a detailed evaluation and will consider whether additional actions are necessary after the evaluation is complete, Gatten said.

Leaking seals on valves that relieve pressure from water flowing through the unit's steam generator prompted Oconee engineers to manually "trip" the reactor around 6 a.m. Thursday, according to an NRC "event notification report" released the following day.

Duke discovered the problem and reported it to the NRC nearly four hours later, according to the notice.

The problem stemmed from the unit's "feedwater system," which governs how water is used to generate steam for power. The system showed fluctuations in how water was flowing.