Official: Reactors protected in worst-case scenario

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SENECA — Efforts made at the Oconee Nuclear Station in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami in Fukushima, Japan, in 2011 would protect the plant against potential worst-case scenarios of flooding or a major earthquake, according to Oconee site vice president Scott Batson.

Batson gave an update Thursday on the efforts at the nuclear plant in addressing a flood as a result of 48 inches of rain within 72 hours or an earthquake equivalent to or greater than the 1886 earthquake in the Charleston area. That earthquake, which would have been a 7.2 magnitude, was the standard under which the plant was built.

"We already have the mitigating strategies, the procedures, our folks are trained and they know how to use the equipment that we already have staged to mitigate either of those events," Batson said.

Batson said some of those efforts are temporary as more permanent solutions

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are put in place. But even the temporary measures would keep the three nuclear reactors at Oconee safe in the event of the worst-case scenarios for rain and earthquake.

Batson said the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami at Fukushima Daiichi, which devastated the nuclear plant there, had a "one in 1,000" probability of occurring. But the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) asked U.S. nuclear plants to go further in looking at worst-case scenarios.

"All of the United States, plants including the Oconee Nuclear Station, are designed for a one in 1,000 event," he said. "We would have been able to withstand that in the United States. What the NRC has asked us to do is look at how would you withstand what is the equivalent of a one in a half million chance or a one in a million chance of occurring. So it is a very low probability of occurring."

Part of the plan is to have measures in place to be able to divert the water away from the nuclear site downstream toward Lake Hartwell, Batson said. Other parts of the plan include erosion protection and backup emergency power.

"We have done modeling to say, for that rain event, where would the deepest levels be pertaining to the nuclear site and how would we mitigate or protect against that?" Batson said. "That work is in progress. There will be permanent modifications done. We've already done temporary modifications and we have mitigation strategies in place that, if it were to occur starting tonight, we can mitigate and manage that event."

Batson said Oconee officials talked to NRC officials about their plans March 31. Roger Hannah, a NRC spokesman, said all nuclear plants in the country were given the task to respond after the incident in Japan. He said the commission has not finished evaluating Oconee's plans.

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