Pipe cited as source of leak at reactor

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SENECA — A pipe that provides backup water to the reactor coolant system in Unit No. 1 at the Oconee Nuclear Station has been identified as the source of a leak in the unit's containment building, which shut down the reactor last week.

Duke Energy Spokeswoman B.J. Gatten said "expert nuclear-qualified welders" have been brought in to assist in cutting out the pipe so that it can be sent to Duke's Metallurgy lab near Charlotte for analysis.

Information from the lab's analysis is expected to be used to find the "root cause" of the leak.

Unit No. 1 has been shut down since Nov. 11. The leak was less than one-tenth of a gallon per minute and was inside the reactor's containment building. Gatten and other officials said the leak never posed a threat to the community, and customer service was not interrupted.

Gatten emphasized the pipe involved in the leak provided backup water.

"The pipe provides water to the

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reactor coolant system as a backup if additional water is needed," she said. "It's not one of those things that we need at all times, but it provides additional water to the reactor coolant system. It's not used in routine operations."

Officials are looking at the other two reactors at the Oconee plant to determine if "they have the potential for this same issue," Gatten said. "That is something we would do routinely."

Gatten said repair work will begin before information comes back from the lab near Charlotte.

"We know it's got to be repaired," she said. "That work will be going on concurrently with finding the cause while we fix what needs to be fixed. After they've made the repairs, the pipe would have to go through extensive testing before we bring the unit back into operation."

Gatten said there is no timetable yet for bringing the unit back online, but said it is likely that finding the root cause of the leak "will probably take longer than bringing the unit back online."

Meanwhile, an additional inspector from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), a mechanical engineering specialist, was scheduled to arrive Monday afternoon to help NRC inspectors with their investigation. Joey Ledford, an NRC spokesman, said the additional inspector is temporarily there to assist in the work.

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