Workers prep for nuke drill

BY MIKE EADS
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — The Oconee Nuclear Station has enjoyed a strong safety record over its nearly 40 years of operation, but that doesn't keep Scott Krein and his staff from preparing for a disaster.

Nearly 100 workers, observers and volunteers from local, state and federal agencies packed into Oconee County's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) on Tuesday to rehearse for next month's biannual Duke drill.

Krein, Oconee County's emergency management director, called the exercise a success.

"It was a great learning opportunity," Krein said. "We had to overcome some difficult obstacles with this one, (but) that's why we do drills."

Tuesday's rehearsal involved a stuck valve and problems with deploying control rods in a reactor. The plant had to conduct an emergency release of radioactive steam. The public safety threat was minimal, but the EOC had to continue its normal operations while dealing with a school evacuation and rumors spreading throughout the community of a much greater threat.

The sense of urgency in the room was palpable throughout the rehearsal's four hours. Early on, Krein reminded the workers that they needed to keep up with their day-to-day responsibilities as well.



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Oconee County emergency workers gathered Tuesday to rehearse for next month's drill with Duke Energy's Oconee Nuclear Station. A nuclear emergency scenario was presented and the workers responded according to their assignments.

"Oconee County is not one of the bigger counties; we all play dual roles," said Krein, noting that none of his staff is dedicated to nuclear event response. "During a real event, they will have to do both jobs."

Quentin Ivy, an evaluation site specialist for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), came over with colleagues from the Atlanta office for Tuesday's rehearsal.

"We're basically just observing," Ivy said. "We help (county workers) by answering any questions they have. This is more of a practice exercise."

It may have been practice, but the emergency staffers were keenly aware of FEMA's presence. Ivy was quick to tell one worker, "I'm not evaluating; I'm just observing," he said with a reassuring smile.

The evaluation will come after September's Duke drill.

"They will be evaluated, and documents will be created on their plans," Ivy said later.

Krien was satisfied with Tuesday's effort, but admitted that there is work to be done in the next four weeks on documentation and better handling of the demands for public information during a nuclear event.

"We found some areas of corrective action we want to improve on, but nothing detrimental to the public," Krein said.

So, are Krein and his staff ready for the real thing?

"Yes, we are ready for a real event," Krein said. "This is the fourth one I've been through and our training has significantly improved over the last four-and-a-half years.

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