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Tougher nuclear security ordered

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COLUMBIA -- The Nuclear Regulatory Commission on Thursday ordered new security measures for the nation's nuclear plants in response to the post-Sept. 11 "high-level threat environment."

New security measures include additional personnel access controls, enhanced requirements for guard forces, increased stand-off distances for searches of vehicles approaching nuclear facilities, and improved coordination with local, state, and federal authorities, the NRC said.

The NRC said some of the requirements "formalize a series of security measures that NRC licensees had taken in response to advisories issued by the NRC in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks."

Asked to elaborate about specific measures at specific plants, such as Duke Energy's Oconee Nuclear Station on Lake Keowee, NRC spokesman Victor Dricks declined comment.

Duke spokesman Tim Pettit said there likely would be increased security measures at Duke's plants, but he said security measures would not be obvious to the public, and perhaps not even to employees.

He said specific changes in security would not be revealed to the public. But the NRC orders "formalize" security measures put into place since Sept. 11, Pettit said.

"Since Sept. 11, we've been in a heightened state of security. We continue to operate in that heightened state of security today. Since those events, we have worked very closely with the federal, state and local law enforcement agencies and the intelligence community to ensure we are taking the appropriate actions to protect these plants," Pettit said.

Gov. Jim Hodges said his office has been in communication with the NRC since Sept. 11 about the security of South Carolina's five nuclear power reactors, but he referred questions about Thursday's NRC actions to his homeland security advisor, retired Army Gen. Steve Siegfried.

Siegfried said the latest NRC orders are part of an ongoing review of the security needs of the plants, a process he called "a journey, not a destination."


Asked if he knew about specific measures to be taken by nuclear plants in South Carolina, Siegfried said, "If I knew, I wouldn't tell you. I'm not going to utter one word that a terrorist can use."

Following the Sept. 11 attacks, the NRC advised all 104 U.S. nuclear power plants and other key nuclear facilities to go to the highest level of security.

Still, nuclear safety activists and some members of Congress have urged the Bush administration to impose stricter security at the plants. They fear the plants, even with thick concrete walls, could be vulnerable to high-speed airliner strikes like the deadly ones on Sept. 11.

When asked if any of the new measures were designed to protect against air attacks, neither Duke nor NRC officials would comment.

"Security against sabotage has long been an important part of NRC's regulatory activities and licensee's responsibilities. Nuclear power plants are among the most formidable structures in existence, and they are guarded by well-trained and well-armed security forces," the NRC said in a statement.

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