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[Furman](#)
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[Weddings](#)
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Oconee nuke plant had worker with criminal record

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The Oconee Nuclear Station allowed a contract worker with a criminal background to enter a vital area of the power plant, a report says.

The incident raised the concern of nuclear watchdog groups, who said it shows the vulnerability of nuclear power plant security to possible terrorist attacks.

The report, filed by Duke Energy Co. and sent to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said a subsequent FBI background check found that the worker lied on a job application by not mentioning his criminal background.

The NRC and Duke Energy refused to disclose the nature of the criminal background or the name of the worker.

FBI spokeswoman Carol Allison declined to comment, saying the investigation is ongoing.

The report says badges allowing access are issued on an interim basis and last up to 180 days.

Ed Lyman, scientific director of the Washington-based Nuclear Control Institute, which opposes nuclear proliferation, said, "the practice of granting temporary access without FBI checks is ridiculous, especially now.

"This shows you what could happen. This is obviously benign, but they're letting criminals get access to the plant right now. This is a warning. I don't know who's listening."

The incident was the third since 1999 where applicants for temporary employment failed to report prior offenses in order to get a job, according to the report.

"Therefore, this is a recurring event," the report said.

No one was harmed and there was no threat to public safety, according to the report.

Duke spokesman Tom Shiel declined to comment.

NRC spokesman Ken Clark said a protected area is anywhere within the fence that surrounds the site, while a vital area means he entered the power plant.

"Occasionally contract workers -- painters, maintenance workers -- get in without an adequate background check," Clark said.

He also declined to comment on the Oconee incident. "We couldn't discuss ongoing investigations," he said.

According to the report, the worker filled out a job application and was issued a badge on March 18 for temporary access, the report said.

To get a badge, the applicant must have a photo identification, pass a credit check, have a character reference, have an employment check for the past year, pass a psychological evaluation, and submit a fingerprint.

The worker was found in the Unit 1 and 2 cable room vital area of the plant for less than four minutes during a pre-job orientation for pending workers.

During that time, he was accompanied by another employee who was authorized to the area and had full unescorted access, the report said.

"At no time did he display any form of aberrant behavior. The intentional falsification does not appear to be due to any malicious intent with respect to the health and safety of the public."

Shiel said the worker was escorted during the four minutes they were in the restricted area.

Duke revoked the worker's badge.

Meanwhile, nuclear watchdog groups said the incident shows how vulnerable nuclear power plants are and how security is lacking.

The report said there were no equipment failures or releases of radiation.

Bob Alvarez, the former top aide to ex-Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, said a 1997 NRC study said a release of radiation would make an area 188 square miles from the plant uninhabitable, cause 20,000 cancer deaths and cause \$59 million in economic loss. It would be worse than a meltdown, he said.

Greenville is about 30 miles east of Seneca, where the power plant is located.

"So much for crack teams," Alvarez said. "That doesn't excuse the fact that they aren't checking. There may be some reactor operators rising to the occasion and some may not -- no one knows."

He said the NRC has not conducted routine exercises since Sept. 11.

He also said the NRC has become less open to the public since the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

"The NRC has dropped an iron curtain," he said. "We don't know if they're slapping their wrists or taking it seriously. These are weapons of mass destruction for terrorists."

Bob Montgomery covers the environment and can be reached at 298-4295.

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