On March 11, 2011, the Great Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami devastated northern Japan. Three nuclear reactors in Fukushima Prefecture melted down and exploded on March 12, March 14 and March 15, 2011 because flooding destroyed the power supply necessary to cool the reactors. More than 30,000 people in a 12-kilometer radioactively contaminated zone are still displaced 11 years later. Of 54 reactors in Japan at the time of the earthquake, only nine have been restarted. As a result of the radiological disaster, Japan has committed to decommission a total of 21 reactors.

Duke Energy’s Oconee nuclear complex is almost 50 years old, as is the upstream Jocassee Dam. The risk of Jocassee Dam failure and flooding of Oconee’s safety equipment is unacceptably high. Dam failure could deliver a wall of water 19 feet high that would overtake the reactor complex and disable the Safe Shutdown Facility. Reactor meltdowns and radiation releases similar to what happened in Japan are predictable. The impact on Clemson University, 10 miles downstream, would be catastrophic.

This dire scenario should be unimaginable. In actuality, the abysmal flood risk is known to both regulators and Duke Energy. Earlier this year, Duke’s 20-year license extension application with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission was put on hold until an environmental impact statement of the flooding risk is completed. Only Godzilla knows when that will be as no deadline has yet been established. The three aging reactors at Oconee threaten not only people and property but also a region beloved for beautiful mountains and rivers, forests, streams, lakes and wildlife. The risk is significant and the stakes are high.