

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Energy, Climate, and Grid Security
Ranking Member Diana DeGette

***Hearing on “Oversight Of NRC: Ensuring Efficient and Predictable Nuclear Safety
Regulation for A Prosperous America”***

June 14, 2023

Thank you, Chair Duncan, and thank you to the NRC Commissioners for being here today. As the agency responsible for overseeing our nation’s nuclear fleet and radioactive materials, the work that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission does is vital not only to our nation’s overall energy security, but to health and safety of the American people as well.

Experts agree that nuclear energy has the potential to play a significant role in our efforts to drive down our nation’s greenhouse gas emissions as we take on the climate crisis. But, in my opinion, we can only do that if we continue to prioritize public health and safety. Currently, nuclear energy is responsible for producing 20% of all the electricity generated in this country, and nearly half of all the carbon-free electricity the U.S. generates each year.

As we work to reduce our emissions from the U.S. energy sector, nuclear energy is often seen as a key technology that can be used to continue providing the American people with the power they need as we make the clean-energy transition. It goes without saying that the NRC would be at the forefront of that effort. While there are several potential benefits of increasing our use of nuclear technology here in the U.S., we cannot do so until we address a number of other issues first.

In April, this committee sent a series of letters to some of the nation’s largest nuclear stakeholders to solicit their feedback on the NRC’s licensing process. The overwhelming response we received from these companies was that the licensing process is overly burdensome and needs to be reformed. If we are going to make nuclear energy a key part of our clean-energy transition, we have to streamline this process.

But, we have to do so in a way that will continue to ensure the highest level of public health and safety. Streamlining this process without increasing safety is not an option. The NRC has a long record of making safety a priority and we must keep it that way. We also need to develop a long-term, comprehensive, community-driven strategy for dealing with spent nuclear fuel. For far too long, we – as a nation – have ignored this problem, and we simply cannot afford to do so any longer.

Expanding nuclear energy without a long-term strategy to deal with the spent fuel rods that will come as a result will only leave more communities vulnerable to an unwanted build-up of nuclear waste in their area. Now, while I believe deeply that these are issues that must be resolved before we begin to expand the use of this technology here in the U.S. – I also believe that solutions are possible.

Through meaningful engagement and dialogue, we can address each of these issues and start moving this nation forward in expanding the use of this critical technology. But if we don't – if we fail to address the issue of spent fuel, or if we fail to take the steps needed to ensure that the highest standards of protecting the public's health and safety remain in place – then I don't see any way that nuclear energy can become a significant part of our clean-energy future.

Let me just close by saying this: I believe there is a real opportunity to drive down our emissions and accelerate our clean-energy transition through the increased use of nuclear power – but we need to do it in the right way.

I look forward to the discussion we are going to have today, and I yield back.