Opening Statement
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Energy
Hearing on "Building a 100 Percent Clean Economy: Advanced Nuclear Technology and Its Role in a Decarbonized Future"
March 3, 2020

Today's hearing continues the Committee's series on building a 100 percent clean economy. At the beginning of the year, I joined Chairmen Tonko and Rush – and other Committee Democrats – in releasing the CLEAN Future Act, a bold plan to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas pollution in order to combat climate change. We have held 15 climate hearings over the last year, seven of them specifically designed to examine how to achieve deep decarbonization of various sectors of our economy.

Today we will focus on nuclear energy's role in a clean energy future. Over the last decade the power sector has made great strides in reducing its emissions. Nevertheless, it remains responsible for 28 percent of our nation's total carbon dioxide pollution. Fossil fuels also still represent nearly two-thirds of electricity generation. So it is essential that we consider any and all technologies that can reduce our dependence on fossil fuel and boost our decarbonization efforts.

Achieving a fully decarbonized economy will require electrifying more things Americans use every day, like vehicles, furnaces and hot water heaters. We will also need to electrify most industrial and manufacturing processes. But electrification will only help us achieve our carbon reduction goals if the electricity comes from clean sources.

Nuclear power is a stable and reliable generating technology that emits no greenhouse gas pollution. It should be an important tool for decarbonizing our economy.

Yet an increasing number of nuclear power plants in recent years have ceased operations for a range of factors, primarily because of the challenge to compete financially in power markets. As these plants go offline, the generating sources replacing them should also be emissions-free. But in many regions of the country, this retiring electricity generation is largely replaced by natural gas.

Advanced nuclear technologies have the potential to provide more of the clean energy we need to decarbonize the economy. Advanced reactors can be designed to provide enhanced safety features and produce less waste. They also offer more flexibility than the designs in operation today because they can come in different sizes, be constructed faster with lower construction costs, and sited in more remote areas.

While we have yet to see any advanced reactors fully commercialized, one project from NuScale is expected to receive final approval from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission this year. There are also many other promising proposals in the research and development phase with an eye towards deployment in the next decade.

Supporting advancements in nuclear energy and bringing these new technologies to scale is one piece of the puzzle necessary to meet our climate goals. We must also invest in renewable energy and energy storage technologies, which will play a big role in decarbonizing the power sector.

But studies show that in order to get to 100 percent decarbonization affordably, we need reliable carbon-free resources like advanced nuclear power that can sustain output for long periods of time. Advanced nuclear also can work with other clean energy sources, like solar and wind, to fully decarbonize the power sector without big increases in utility bills.

At the beginning of the century, there were rumblings of a nuclear energy renaissance with multiple large nuclear projects planned and the NRC staffing up to handle new license applications. But that did not come to fruition, and we must contemplate how the next generation of reactors can be brought to market and deployed affordably. This is something I believe most Democrats and Republicans agree on, and I hope we can continue to work together to find ways to facilitate the development and deployment of advanced, safer, cleaner and more flexible nuclear technologies.

We have a knowledgeable panel of witnesses today – including the CEOs of two companies actively working to commercialize advanced reactor designs. I hope we can shed more light on current challenges, the policies Congress can pursue to facilitate the transition, and how advanced nuclear technologies can play a role in achieving full decarbonization of the power sector.