Committee on Energy and Commerce

Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on "Keeping Us Safe and Secure: Oversight of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission"

July 14, 2021

Today the Committee continues its longstanding tradition of conducting oversight of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC). I want to welcome new NRC Chairman Christopher Hanson, Commissioner Jeff Baran – a former Energy and Commerce staffer – and Commissioner David Wright. Thank you for joining us today.

Nuclear power has a role to play in our efforts to tackle the climate crisis. Last year, the power sector accounted for nearly a third of total U.S. carbon dioxide emissions. Studies show that to achieve 100 percent decarbonization affordably, we need reliable carbon-free resources that can sustain output for long periods of time.

My home state of New Jersey has three operational nuclear power reactors at the Salem and Hope Creek plants in the southern part of the state. The state is also home to the Oyster Creek nuclear plant, which ceased operations in 2018 and is now in the decommissioning process. NRC's oversight of operating reactors — and those in the decommissioning process — is critical to the health and safety of those in surrounding communities.

One issue that is important to my state and many others that are home to shuttered nuclear power plants is NRC's proposed "Decommissioning Rulemaking." As more nuclear plants retire, the decommissioning process must work for all stakeholders. This rule has been in the works since 2018, but I remain seriously concerned with several aspects of it. I believe the rule provides an insufficient role for local communities to participate in the decommissioning process. Further, the lack of official NRC approval or disapproval of a plant's decommissioning plan is both puzzling and disturbing.

I also have concerns with proposed changes to the Commission's Reactor Oversight Process, the program that oversees safety and security at our nation's nuclear power plants. I am particularly troubled by proposals that would arbitrarily reduce core safety inspections and reduce the importance and public reporting of so-called "white" findings, which are safety or security issues of moderate significance. Conducting fewer safety inspections at nuclear plants — even at the plants with the best safety records — could lead to safety and security gaps that are ultimately missed by nuclear regulators. And multiple white findings at a plant can often point to larger, systemic safety or security issues, and therefore we should not underestimate the importance of analyzing these factors.

The nuclear industry frequently touts its safety successes over the past decades, but that success is partly due to the efforts of federal regulators to stay on top of inspections and safety

protocols at plants across the country. Making nuclear power more cost competitive by weakening NRC's safety oversight is dangerous and, ultimately, self-defeating.

Last week, NRC announced it would begin to review how the Commission's programs and policies address environmental justice. Underserved communities and communities of color have disproportionately faced the negative effects of energy generation and climate change. I welcome the NRC environmental justice review and hope it leads to greater consideration and inclusion of the views of these marginalized communities.

We must also find a solution to address our nation's need to safely store and dispose of spent nuclear fuel. Last year, President Trump drove a stake through the heart of the Yucca Mountain project when he reversed his support for the project and eliminated its funding. I continue to believe interim storage is the best near-term solution to stop the nuclear waste stalemate and maintain our commitment to communities and ratepayers.

The NRC is critical to ensuring a safe and reliable U.S. nuclear energy sector. I look forward to your testimony today as we discuss the path forward, and I yield back the balance of my time.