



COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY & COMMERCE
RANKING MEMBER FRANK PALLONE, JR.

DEMOCRATS

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Click [here](#) to watch the hearing. Additional materials, including witness testimony and a background memo, can be found [here](#).

**Statement of Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr., as prepared for delivery
House Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Hearing on “Oversight Failures Behind the Radiological Incident at DOE’s Waste
Isolation Pilot Plant”**

Today’s hearing will focus on oversight failures at the Department of Energy’s Waste Isolation Pilot Plant – or WIPP. The incidents there raise broader questions about how to conduct effective oversight across the DOE-NNSA nuclear complex.

On this Committee, there has long been bipartisan support for congressional oversight to ensure that DOE is effectively managing its contractors and keeping the nuclear complex safe. And DOE and NNSA have shown repeatedly that our continued oversight is needed.

For nearly two decades now, this Committee, GAO, and DOE’s Inspector General have identified a wide array of safety and security issues facing DOE and NNSA sites. Let me walk through just a few of those.

In 2004, Los Alamos National Laboratory suspended operations after a student was partially blinded in a laser accident and classified information went missing.

In 2006, a drug raid in a mobile home park found a large number of classified documents that had been removed from an NNSA lab.

In 2007, a GAO report revealed that NNSA weapons laboratory workers had faced nearly 60 serious accidents or near misses over the previous seven year period.

In 2008, GAO found security and protection of weapons-grade nuclear material severely lacking at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, due in part to NNSA’s deficient oversight.

In 2012, three trespassers managed to gain access to a secure area directly adjacent to some of the nation's most critically important weapon-related facilities at Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

This Committee has held a number of hearings on these topics to understand what went wrong and what DOE and NNSA were doing to ensure this did not happen again in the future.

But now we find ourselves dealing with today's topic.

In February 2014, WIPP experienced both an underground truck fire and a radiological release from a nuclear waste drum within a nine-day period. Operations at WIPP were subsequently shut down. The facility has still not reopened, and it may cost over half a billion dollars to make it fully operational again.

This is an alarming record. The DOE and NNSA facilities guard some of the nation's most dangerous nuclear materials. And for too long, the DOE and NNSA have allowed mismanagement and oversight failures to continue. We need answers today about how that will change.

Effective contractor oversight is a key component of those changes. DOE and NNSA rely heavily on contractors to carry out their mission activities. In 2010, DOE changed its system for contractor oversight to be more hands-off. They planned to rely on the contractor assurance systems – developed by the contractors themselves – to catch problems and provide data for federal oversight efforts.

In our 2012 hearing on the Y-12 incident, the Committee concluded that DOE and NNSA needed to do a better job of overseeing their contractors. Yet here we are today with recent documentation from GAO and DOE's own accident investigation boards that contractor assurance systems across the DOE-NNSA complex may not be capable of identifying risks and weaknesses.

I look forward to hearing GAO share their findings today, and I hope to hear concrete plans from DOE and NNSA for amending their systems for contractor oversight.

I want to close by talking about how many billions of dollars we have spent to fix these repeated problems across DOE. DOE's Office of Environmental Management and NNSA have been on GAO's "high risk" list for a long time, largely due to their struggles to stay within cost and schedule estimates for most major projects.

Regarding what happened at WIPP, NNSA's written testimony today says, "The release, which was subsequently determined to have been avoidable, will be costly to fix, and has left us without a transuranic waste repository for an indeterminate period of time."

The bottom line here is that when these projects go off the rails, taxpayers' dollars are at risk and so are important projects our national security depends on. We need to make sure taxpayers' money is spent more wisely.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for being here today. This Committee has spent decades doing oversight on these issues, and I assure you we will keep a close eye moving forward.

Thank you.

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