

**Committee on Energy and Commerce**

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery  
of  
Full Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.**

***Hearing on “Nuclear Regulatory Commission: Oversight of Activities, Priorities, and Fiscal Year 2027 Budget”***

**April 22, 2026**

This is a precarious moment for nuclear energy in America. On one hand, there is more interest in nuclear energy and the carbon-free power it can deliver than at any time in the last 50 years.

However, at the same time, the Trump Administration’s actions have thrown the safety of the American civilian nuclear fleet into question for the first time since the Atomic Energy Act unlocked the peaceful use of nuclear power over 70 years ago. The five commissioners before us today are the last line of defense for nuclear safety.

Today, we should be talking about how the NRC is implementing the ADVANCE Act, a historic package of reforms passed last Congress to prepare our nation for a wave of advanced nuclear reactors. And we should be discussing how the Commission is preparing itself to efficiently license advanced nuclear technologies.

But the Trump Administration has made that impossible. The White House, the Department of Energy, and even staff affiliated with DOGE have attacked the NRC’s independence.

Last year, President Trump illegally fired former NRC Chairman Chris Hanson, who should be sitting in front of us today. The DOE’s chief counsel for nuclear energy told his colleagues that, and I quote, “the NRC is going to do whatever we tell the NRC to do.” This threat to the NRC’s independence is unacceptable.

Fifty-two years ago, Congress passed a law creating the NRC, forever separating the parts of the government responsible for promoting nuclear energy from the parts responsible for making sure that nuclear energy is safe. That was the right call then and remains the right call today. Actions to tear down that separation aren’t just ill-advised – they’re dangerous, and they jeopardize the future of nuclear energy in our nation.

Whether or not nuclear energy has a bright future in the United States may come down to how – or if – the NRC can protect its independence over the next few years. Commissioners, you have a duty to the American people to uphold that independence and ensure safe and secure nuclear energy in our nation.

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I want to give credit where credit is due: Chairman Nieh, since assuming the chairmanship of the Commission earlier this year, I think your office has been a model for transparency. The NRC's staff have consistently and thoroughly engaged with my staff. You have ensured that we are thoroughly briefed on the many changes that you are making to the NRC's rules to license nuclear reactors more effectively. The level of transparency you have shown should be the standard, but unfortunately the Department of Energy has lagged far behind the NRC in this area.

I also want to praise a number of the efforts the Commission has engaged in under your leadership. Seven years ago, the Nuclear Energy Innovation and Modernization Act was signed into law. It required the NRC to issue a rule to establish a new, technologically flexible process for licensing advanced reactors. I am pleased that last month, the NRC was able to publish a final rule more than a year ahead of the deadline set out by the law, and I hope developers take advantage of it going forward.

However, other changes by the Commission go too far. The changes made to the Commission's Reactor Oversight Program – the program responsible for ensuring the ongoing safety of existing, operating reactors – go far beyond what was envisioned in the ADVANCE Act.

Those changes could result in nearly 40 percent of the reactor oversight staff losing their jobs or being reassigned. Frankly, after the staff turnover the Commission has suffered throughout the last year as a result of DOGE's attacks, I don't think the NRC can afford another exodus of smart, talented employees.

I also have deep concerns about efforts to tie NRC licenses for commercial nuclear reactors to research reactors permitted by the Departments of Energy and Defense. I expect that there will be tremendous pressure on the Commission to offer those research reactors a type of formal "fast pass" to NRC licensing. That would be a disaster and would undermine the NRC's independence. It should NOT happen.

Finally, I want to end my remarks by reiterating a warning I issued last week when we had the Energy Secretary in front of us: it will be impossible for us to move forward on nuclear legislation as long as the NRC's independence is in question. We simply cannot put the independence of the NRC at risk.

Thank you and I yield back the balance of my time.