

It's Time for America to Unleash Next-Generation Nuclear Energy

By [Byron Donalds](#) & [Christopher Barnard](#)

March 22, 2023

The year 2022 was the beginning of a nuclear energy renaissance—both here in America and abroad. [Japan](#) and [South Korea](#) have recently made historic nuclear investments, and in the United States, the first new reactor in nearly thirty years reached criticality [this month](#)—meaning the nuclear reactor can now successfully generate power on its own. Simply put, this domestic accomplishment is a monumental achievement for the American nuclear industry overall.

Additionally, the Biden administration announced the allocation of [\\$1.2 billion](#) to keep aging nuclear power plants online—but the real solution to our country's ongoing nuclear predicament is to create a regulatory environment in which next-generation nuclear technology can be developed, deployed, and replicated in an efficient and modernized manner.

Federal regulations currently stand in the way of unleashing America's full nuclear energy potential. To note, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is an inefficient and antiquated federal bureaucracy that's deeply constrained by an archaic mission statement and a maze of confusing red tape. Meanwhile, countries like France, Poland, and Finland are [banding together](#) to support nuclear energy throughout the European continent. In other words, America's current nuclear-related regulatory landscape has greatly constrained and limited our country's geopolitical nuclear leadership role.

As a country, we must move to prioritize nuclear energy as a reliable, abundant, and clean energy source in more than just rhetoric. The time is ripe for meaningful congressional action relating to nuclear.

Unfortunately, distorted fears and confusion have surrounded nuclear energy for the last few decades. That said, popular opinion is rapidly changing. Support for nuclear power [has steadily risen](#) among the American people since 2016, and [young Republicans](#) specifically are heavily in favor of expanding nuclear power. Importantly, support for nuclear energy is the [highest](#) among individuals that neighbor conventional nuclear power plants—meaning the closer you are to nuclear power in action, the more favorable your view is.

With that in mind, it's commonsense to unleash the unique benefits of nuclear energy throughout the United States—to ultimately secure American energy independence, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and provide domestic leadership in the global nuclear realm. But for too long, bureaucracy and NIMBYism have stood between the American people and nuclear energy. Some view nuclear power as unsafe and too expensive. Yet, the nuclear innovation behind the scenes hasn't stopped, and we're no longer talking about our grandparents' nuclear power.

No, when we talk about expanding nuclear energy in the United States, we're talking about next-generation nuclear power—such as small modular reactors (SMRs) and microreactors. Smaller, simpler, cheaper to make, and just as reliable, advanced nuclear reactors present a future solution for augmenting our nation's electric grid—if only we could license these pieces of innovative technology domestically.

In fact, the first SMR design, created by NuScale, was recently [certified](#) by the NRC after [half a billion dollars](#) and the better part of a [decade](#). While this news is encouraging, it's crucial that the federal government prioritize streamlining the regulatory process associated with the licensing of advanced nuclear reactors. There are several encouraging advanced nuclear projects in the works that shouldn't be held up in the arduous federal permitting process. Many innovative nuclear companies simply cannot bear the associated NRC fees, and as a country, we can't afford to wait years to embrace and revamp this noteworthy source of reliable, clean, and safe baseload energy.

Diagnosing challenges at the NRC, reducing regulatory burdens on small businesses that seek to get involved in the advanced nuclear industry, deploying microreactors to respond to the impacts of a natural disaster, and expressing broad federal support for the development and deployment of domestic nuclear energy are all initiatives that I've championed in the 118th Congress.

To be frank, any emissions-related climate goals are moonshots without nuclear energy, and next-generation nuclear technology is something that the United States can and SHOULD lead on. To assert international leadership and better position our country for generations to come, unleashing America's domestic nuclear energy potential is the way forward.

Congressman Byron Donalds has represented Florida's 19th congressional district since 2021 and was previously a state legislator in Florida for four years.

Christopher Barnard is the VP of External Affairs with the American Conservation Coalition (ACC), a nonprofit organization building the conservative environmental movement.