Chairman Pallone Opening Statement – "Building a 100 Percent Clean Economy: Solutions for the U.S. Building Sector"
Energy Subcommittee
September 20, 2019

Today's hearing is the Committee's second this week and third in a series of ongoing hearings as we work to achieve a 100 percent clean economy by 2050. On Wednesday, the Environment and Climate Change Subcommittee examined the challenges in the industrial sector, and today this Subcommittee will review the U.S. building sector. We will discuss policies to reduce pollution and save money by making our buildings more efficient.

Residential and commercial buildings are responsible for nearly 40 percent of U.S. carbon pollution — more than any other sector. This is not only attributable to electricity consumption, but also to the use of fossil fuels in furnaces, hot water heaters and other building equipment and appliances. Roughly half of building floor space in the U.S. is heated by fossil fuel-fired systems.

Developing a 100 percent clean economy by 2050 is not going to be easy, but it is absolutely necessary and there are policies and solutions in the building sector that can help us reach that goal.

Reducing pollution from buildings is tied to the power sector and how we produce electricity. Buildings account for 70 percent of U.S. electricity consumption, and that means making them 100 percent clean requires transitioning the power sector to clean, no-carbon resources, like renewables and nuclear power.

Perhaps the quickest and easiest way to reduce building emissions is by improving building efficiency. Existing energy efficiency measures have shown the ability to dramatically reduce building energy use and the associated operating costs for heating, cooling, and lighting. Yet there is much more we can do to accelerate and broaden the adoption of these technologies. Adhering to strong building energy codes, updating federal minimum energy efficiency standards for building equipment and appliances, and bolstering federal support for programs to weatherize homes can all make a huge impact.

Unfortunately, President Trump is stifling this effort to both save money and reduce carbon pollution. His Administration has refused to finalize or update efficiency standards for more than a dozen consumer products. At the same time, he is rolling back efficiency standards for lightbulbs, allowing inefficient products to stay on the market for years. This wastes energy and costs consumers more money.

As we explore ways to reduce carbon pollution from the building sector we must: improve the energy performance of existing buildings that will likely still be in use in 2050.

The upfront costs of retrofitting remain a barrier we must address. This Committee has already acted by passing a bill, authored by Chairmen Tonko and Rush, to increase funding for DOE's Weatherization Assistance Program. We passed legislation by Representative Kelly to provide funds for public building efficiency upgrades. And we've passed Representatives Stanton and Veasey's bill to reauthorize the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant Program. These will help, but we will need to do a lot more to meet the 2050 goal.

There are several interesting ideas that I look forward to exploring today, including performance standards for existing buildings, innovative smart building controls, the use of net zero building materials and designs, and electrification of heating and cooling systems.

States have often been leaders on this issue. My state of New Jersey has a draft "Energy Master Plan" that calls for electrifying the building sector by 2050 and reducing the reliance on natural gas for heating homes and buildings. Other states are making similar progress. But the federal government must also lead similar efforts to decarbonize commercial and residential buildings across the country.

Making existing buildings more energy efficient can creates jobs in every community across the country. Over 2 million Americans work in energy efficiency, and it is the fastest growing energy sector in the country. The widespread need for this work also creates opportunities to invest in worker training and address local unemployment in vulnerable communities. Increasing federal investment in energy efficiency will spur job growth and community development that will impact every state and district.

Reducing building emissions will help us address the climate crisis. It will also lower energy bills and make the buildings we live and work in more comfortable, safer and healthier. I look forward to the testimony from our panel of witnesses today as we look to find solutions that will work for all of us.

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