

Committee on Energy and Commerce

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

***Hearing on “American Nuclear Energy Expansion: Updating Policies for Efficient,
Predictable Licensing and Deployment”***

July 18, 2023

Nuclear power plays an important role in producing carbon-free power for the electric grid. In April, this Subcommittee held a hearing examining the current and future nuclear energy landscape, and just last month we had all five commissioners from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission before us to talk about the NRC’s vital work. Those hearings have been the most bipartisan hearings we’ve had this Congress on the Energy Subcommittee, and I certainly hope today’s hearing continues that tone as we examine ideas to improve America’s nuclear power policies.

The NRC has done an admirable job over the years of ensuring nuclear power is safe and secure. We must now find ways to make the NRC’s work more efficient, without compromising on the extremely high safety standards that it has holds itself and the nuclear industry to.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses – across both panels – on how the 15 bills included in today’s hearing advance that goal, and where they fall short and need to be improved. I think there are some good bills before us today, while some need improvement. I’m hopeful that we can work together on these bills so we can enable the NRC to safely and efficiently license our nation’s nuclear reactors for the future.

I want to briefly highlight a few of the bills I am particularly interested in. Ranking Member DeGette’s bill, the Strengthening the NRC Workforce Act, would allow the NRC to enjoy the alternative compensation authority we granted to FERC back in the bipartisan Energy Act of 2020, as well as direct hire authority. This would allow the NRC to attract and retain talent and expertise, something that will be critical as we ask it to license advanced reactors.

Representative Levin’s bill, the NRC Office of Public Engagement and Participation Act, would create an office of public engagement and participation at the NRC, modeled off FERC’s Office of Public Participation. Last month, in our hearing with the NRC Commissioners, I asked Chairman Hanson about the concept, and he indicated that he would be supportive of it. The purpose of an office of public engagement and participation would be to demystify the NRC and increase the ability of communities impacted by its decisions to access its proceedings. I look forward to getting feedback on this bill today, and on working with the majority to find a way forward on it.

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I would also like to mention the discussion draft based on Representative Latta's bill, the Nuclear Fuel Security Act. I support this bill – so much that I offered it as an amendment during Subcommittee and full Committee markups of H.R. 1042, and I'm pleased to see that it has been included in this hearing with relatively few changes. I hope my Republican colleagues have reconsidered voting "no" on it twice. Nuclear fuel security is a vitally important issue, but we can't just ban Russian uranium without ensuring that there will be an American supply chain to replace it.

While I support all three of these bills, there are some bills I have concerns with and would like to see changes to. The Nuclear Advisory Committee Reform Act would potentially diminish the Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards (ACRS) by only requiring the Committee to weigh in when requested by the NRC. I am afraid this could create another layer of unintentional bureaucracy or sideline the ACRS altogether.

The Efficient Nuclear Licensing Hearings Act would remove the requirement that NRC hold hearings on new reactors, which could diminish public confidence that the NRC is holding nuclear power plants to a sufficient level of scrutiny.

Finally, the NRC Mission Alignment Act would change and codify the mission of the NRC. It is a substantial expansion of the NRC's authority that I do not believe is necessary and could undermine its independence. It could also send a bad signal to countries working to set up nuclear power regulatory regimes overseas, who often look to the NRC as a model of an independent nuclear regulator.

Over the last four years, Democrats passed major legislation like the Energy Act of 2020, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and the Inflation Reduction Act to support safe and clean nuclear power, including investments at the Department of Energy. These laws included historic climate investments to help us lead the rest of the world in the transition to clean energy, while also creating millions of good-paying clean energy jobs and lowering energy costs for Americans. I'm hopeful that we can now work together to build on those successes.

Thank you, and I yield back.