

Testimony of Austin Keyser
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Before the Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change
House Committee on Energy and Commerce
U.S. House of Representatives
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Chairman Tonko, Ranking Member Shimkus, and Members of the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change, thank you for inviting me to today's legislative hearing.

Background

My name is Austin Keyser. I am the Director of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Political & Legislative Department. I have been asked by our President, Lonnie Stephenson, to speak on behalf of the IBEW.

The IBEW is the largest energy union in the world. We represent more than 775,000 members in the United States, U.S. territories, and Canada, who work in a variety of energy related fields including utilities, construction, telecommunications, broadcasting, manufacturing, railroads, and government.

Importance of Nuclear Power

Nuclear energy in America produces nearly 20 percent of our nation's electricity and accounts for over 50 percent of all zero carbon emission generation in the country. As the United States moves towards increasing reliance on renewable energy, such as solar and wind, the need for nuclear energy's reliability, the country's only carbon-free source that can ensure around-the-clock generation, even during inclement weather, has become even greater. Supporting nuclear generation is critical if the United States is going to continue to reduce carbon

emissions and avoid the worst potential impacts of climate change while meeting baseload energy demands for American citizens and businesses.

Nuclear Power and the Workforce

Fifteen thousand members of the IBEW are employed full-time by the nuclear industry at over 55 facilities across the United States. Thousands more IBEW members rotate through nuclear plants with the contractor workforce as needed for maintenance and refueling. The IBEW has a proud history of working in the commercial nuclear industry dating back to the 1950s with the first civilian nuclear reactor at Shippingport, Pennsylvania. IBEW nuclear workers can say without reservation that this is an industry with a proven record of exceptional safety. It is among the safest industrial work environments in the United States.

The nuclear industry supplies high quality, long term, steady work that typically pays one-third more than the average jobs in their community. These are the types of family-sustaining careers that Americans are looking for and policymakers should support.

A major issue of concern for the IBEW's membership are the large number of nuclear plant closures that have taken place in recent years and the additional closures that are anticipated in the near future. Hundreds of IBEW members lose their well-paying, family-supporting jobs every time a nuclear facility closes, often eliminating the biggest source of economic activity in their respective communities. We've already seen the impacts of plant closures for communities that supported Vermont Yankee, Fort Calhoun and Kewaunee. We fear a similar fate for our workers and their communities, including for IBEW workers at the Davis-Besse and Perry plants in my home state of Ohio, for the Beaver Valley and Three Mile Island facilities in Pennsylvania, and for workers at the recently decommissioned Pilgrim nuclear plant in Massachusetts.

Spent Nuclear Fuel

A critical piece to supporting the future of our nation's nuclear sector, and the tens of thousands of family-supporting jobs that the nuclear industry creates, is opening a permanent repository for spent nuclear fuel (SNF). Under federal statute, a permanent geologic repository was scheduled to open at Yucca Mountain, Nevada no later than January 31, 1998. Over two decades later, ratepayers and workers are still waiting for a repository to safely store over 80,000 metric tons of SNF sitting at 121 sites in 39 states across the country. The IBEW supports legislative efforts to restart the licensing process of Yucca Mountain and allow the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to make a final decision on whether the site meets the necessary requirements to store our nation's SNF. Going back to the late 1970's, the IBEW has adopted formal resolutions that endorse legislation that "ensures timely central storage, safe transportation, and permanent disposal of spent nuclear fuels."

The IBEW and the other members of the Building Trades were part of the construction of the Yucca Mountain site before work halted in 2010. If work recommences at Yucca Mountain, it is estimated it would create 2,000 construction jobs for 10 years.

The opening of a permanent geologic repository would help alleviate the concerns within the general public surrounding nuclear power and boost support for nuclear generation as a foundational part of our nation's energy portfolio. We believe a permanent repository is necessary to ensure the public's support for the next generation of advanced nuclear reactors that we hope will come online in the near future, including small modular reactors (SMRs).

Additionally, the IBEW supports the authorization of a consolidated interim facility to safely store SNF, particularly for dry caskets currently located at non-generating nuclear plants. The opening of an interim storage facility would allow for the redevelopment of shuttered nuclear plants, bringing economic

revitalization, tax revenue and jobs to working families and communities that were hard hit by these closures. In fact, many closed nuclear stations are ideal sites for future development of other forms of electrical generation, including renewables, due to the already existing electrical transmission infrastructure.

It is important that the opening of a consolidated interim storage facility have the support of the host state and local community and the authorizing legislation have clear language ensuring that an interim facility does not become a de facto permanent storage site.

Legislation

Today's hearing focuses on three bills: the Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act (H.R. 2699), the Storage and Transportation of Residual and Excess (STORE) Act (H.R. 3136), and the Spent Fuel Prioritization Act (H.R. 2995).

The IBEW, as stated earlier, supports the opening of a permanent geologic storage facility as soon as one is properly licensed and built. The Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act would help facilitate the licensing process by resolving key issues such as land withdrawal and site infrastructure at Yucca Mountain and require the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to conclude its review of the application within 30 months of enactment. This legislation, in addition, would authorize the Energy Department to open interim storage facilities to consolidate SNF from sites with a decommissioned reactor and provide a pathway for the State of Nevada and local communities to discuss benefits associated with these projects. Very similar legislation passed the House of Representatives last year with strong bipartisan support and a 340-72 vote.

The STORE Act would authorize the Energy Department to open at least one interim storage facility. The legislation, similarly to H.R. 2699, would require consent from the state and local community before an interim site can be licensed.

Additionally, we support the provisions in the STORE Act to prioritize SNF currently at closed nuclear facilities for interim storage.

The IBEW would strongly prefer that Congress take action to open a permanent repository as soon as possible, but given the current political barriers surrounding Yucca Mountain, we recognize that providing authorization for an interim facility may be the best first step towards a necessary comprehensive solution that will consolidate SNF at a central repository.

The Spent Fuel Prioritization Act would prioritize the storage of SNF from decommissioned nuclear plants near large populations and located in an area with a high seismic hazard. The IBEW believe Congress and federal regulators should treat all communities with decommissioned nuclear facilities fairly and consider several factors to best prioritize storage, including the length of time the plant has been decommissioned and potential harm to the public, including from decaying containers, seismic activity and rising sea levels.

The IBEW, in addition, supports congressional action that will protect ratepayers, including union workers, who have paid tens of billions of dollars into the Nuclear Waste Fund for decades by ensuring fees are not prematurely reinstated until it is demonstrated that additional monies are necessary to achieve full cost recovery of the program. We appreciate that the sponsors of the Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act and the STORE Act included provisions to protect ratepayers from such additional fees.

Conclusion

On behalf of the IBEW, I again thank the committee for the opportunity to testify this morning and thank the sponsors of the three bills that are being discussed. The IBEW respectfully urges Congress to take the necessary steps to resolve this problem and open a permanent repository. Now is the time to come

together and pass bipartisan legislation that will honor the federal government's promise to the nuclear industry, union workers and ratepayers.