Opening Statement of Republican Leader Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change
"Cleaning Up Communities: Ensuring Safe Storage and Disposal of Spent Nuclear Fuel"
June 13, 2019
As Prepared for Delivery

The Energy and Commerce Committee has an enduring and strong bipartisan record supporting nuclear energy. Nuclear is a critical component of our nation's energy system. It also has been vital to our national security, powering the nuclear navy and providing for our common defense.

Not only is nuclear power an affordable and reliable energy source, it's also emissions-free. Any serious efforts to reduce emissions from energy production to address the effects of climate change must include the continued use and expansion of nuclear power. And there is great potential--if we get the policies right--to benefit from nuclear energy far into the future.

Over the past few years we've moved legislation to lay the groundwork for advanced nuclear and to ensure more efficient regulation of the existing reactor fleet

We've explored policies that will ensure a nuclear infrastructure for tomorrow – ranging from advanced small modular reactors like those

under development by Oregon-based NuScale, currently in NRC licensing, to advanced fuel systems for the next generation of reactors.

Yet, as we look forward, we have responsibility to ensure we implement the existing policies that address the issue of long-term storage of spent nuclear fuel, and the defense legacy waste that the federal government has a responsibility for cleaning up.

This is no small matter. 35 years ago, Congress enacted the Nuclear Waste Policy Act into law. This law was the culmination of decades of experience by the federal government to develop a policy to permanently dispose of high-level radioactive waste and commercial spent nuclear fuel.

Some of the material was created during the Manhattan Project and through the Cold War at the Hanford site, a vital national security facility located on the Columbia River about 40 miles north of my district. Today, this nuclear material sits on a vibrant waterway waiting to be processed and transported to the Yucca Mountain repository in the Nevada desert.

The Nuclear Waste Policy Act also established a fee tied to the generation of nuclear energy to finance the costs of a multi-generational

disposal program. Along with 33 other states, Oregon ratepayers fulfilled their financial obligations under the law and paid the Department of Energy over $160 million to dispose of commercial spent nuclear fuel.

I've noted in the past how the Trojan nuclear power plant, located in northwest Oregon, stopped producing electricity in 1993, with the expectation that DOE would begin to remove the spent fuel in 1998, as was required by law. That never happened and since the plant's decommissioning activities were completed in 2007, only spent nuclear fuel remains stranded at the site, hampering any redevelopment efforts surrounding it.

This example is repeated across the nation, with states and communities waiting for DOE to fulfill its obligations and dispose of the spent fuel.

As we all know, the Federal government has been prevented from completing the licensing process for a permanent repository. The costs to the American taxpayer to pay for the federal government's delay in opening the Yucca Mountain repository have more than doubled to $35 billion since 2009 and that figure continues to escalate rapidly as time goes on. Meanwhile, the federal government is paying out nearly a

billion dollars a year from the judgement fund for its failure to dispose of the waste.

Against this backdrop, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate your moving forward on examining legislative reforms that can help to restart this process.

The Energy and Commerce Committee should continue to lead the effort to ensure the Federal government meets is moral and fiduciary responsibility to clean up its defense waste and ensure the permanent, safe disposal of spent nuclear fuel.

We made important strides in the last Congress to reform the fundamental statute to help to accelerate this complicated process. My friend and the Republican Leader of this subcommittee, John Shimkus, led the work in the House to pass the Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act by a vote of 340-72. Unfortunately, that effort fell short in the Senate.

But we know from the last Congress, and from the strong bipartisan support both on this Committee and in the House of that legislation, how a thoughtful and deliberate legislative process produces good policy.

I’m pleased to see this past work has informed the current work, particularly in HR 2699, led by Mr. McNerney, which follows closely the H.R. 3053 from the last Congress.

This bill provides for accelerating interim storage of waste without undermining the important system for permanent disposal established in the underlying law. This represents the best path forward for getting the nation to a licensing decision, which is necessary for public confidence in our nuclear waste program, no matter the outcome of that decision.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for taking the lead on this important issue.