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Commissioner Wright 2024 RIC Remarks

Good morning, everyone!

And thank you for the welcome.

I hope you enjoyed the video my team and I put together showcasing our inspectors, our administrative staff, and everyone who sacrifices daily to keep “all things nuclear” safe and reliable.

We had a lot of fun filming it for you, and, as always, a big shoutout and thank you to my friends in AV! Kevin, Kyle, Leon – y’all are awesome!

Also, I want to express my immense appreciation for all those involved with organizing the RIC.

I always look forward to this conference – getting to meet folks and hearing about the latest in nuclear.

I know an incredible amount of work goes into planning this every year, so thanks to you all – you’ve really outdone yourselves this year.

My name is David Wright, appearing today in my role as “The Man from the U.S. NRC” and one of the four Commissioners currently serving at the NRC.

To those of you here in this room, and to those of you watching online: welcome to the 2024 Regulatory Information Conference hosted by the United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

My goal, and hope, during the next 30 to 45 minutes is to inform you, motivate you, challenge you and spotlight – sometimes literally – some of the great people that ensure the safe deployment and safe use of nuclear technologies.

As plenary sessions go, this is the first time that I have presented immediately following the Chair – or any other chair for that matter – and Chair Hanson, you’re a tough act to follow.

To you, and to Commissioner Caputo and Commissioner Crowell – thank you for your friendship and for the collegial way you and each of your staff work with me and my team.

To my team – Team Wright – you’re simply the best!

I am blessed by each of you, and I thank you for what you do for me, what you do for each other, for the NRC and for the country.

As part of my RIC remarks each year, I do my best to give you an update on the happenings in my life during the previous year, and some years are more eventful than others.

You may remember – in my RIC presentation from my kitchen table during COVID in 2021, I shared that my mother’s home had been invaded by squirrels, and they ate through the water lines inside of her home and flooded her downstairs.

What a mess that was: and catching the squirrels ... well, that’s a whole ‘nother story!

Two years ago, right before the RIC, believe it or not, my home flooded from the inside – but not because of squirrels – so in my RIC presentation last year, I shared how I lived on a microwave and a grill in 2022 while my home was being torn apart and rebuilt.

The morning I got the call about the flooding of my home in March of 2022, I drove home immediately. When I got home and saw the damage to my house, my spirit sank.

After seeing the extensive damage that the water had caused, I went to see my Mom and she knew I was devastated. So, she did what only a mother can do.

She looked at me, smiled, and said, “Copycat!” That made me laugh, and somehow, I immediately felt better about the curve ball life had thrown at me.

What a multi-year mess it has been!

And those of you who have gone through something similar in your lives – you know what I mean. 2023 was a busy year for me, and for my family, too.

My youngest son, Andrew, who has his Master’s in Math, went through the first year of the doctoral program at the Medical University of South Carolina to get a PhD in Data Science.

He and his wife, who is in Pharmacy School there herself, are loving life and doing very well.

My daughters, Kimberly and Courtney, and their respective families continued to blaze their own trails and do new things in 2023 – Kimberly, as a kindergarten teacher for nineteen years now – and Courtney, in multiple roles at the South Carolina Department of Workforce for almost the same length of time. Their spouses are hard-working and very supportive of them, too.

Last but not least, my oldest son, Austin, and his wife brought a new “Wright” into the world: my eighth grandchild, a granddaughter.

The name of the latest “small modular” addition is Nellie Michelle Wright, and she came into the world on November 9th of last year – at full power, too, I might add. She’s a beautiful little girl, and her brother, Hank, can’t get enough of her.

If you can’t tell, I’m a proud Dad and a proud Paw Paw, too. I do love my family!

I had to move my soon-to-be 93-year-old mother to an assisted-living facility last April. She had a really rough 2023, but she’s doing okay right now.

She’s one tough lady, and if I know Mom like I think I do, I’m pretty sure she’s gonna’ be running that assisted-living facility before the year is out.

My parents helped me discover that I could do anything I set my mind to. They helped me establish and grow my faith and taught me that – through faith – anything is possible ... anything!

I really relied on that during my battle with colon cancer back in 2008, and I have believed it and relied on it every day since, too.

My Mom and Dad influenced me in different ways, and I believe I am a good blend of both of them, but I give Mom credit for my volunteer spirit, for my desire to help others, for my desire to empower people to be successful and to become the best version of themselves possible.

In addition to being an inspiration to me, my Mom has spent her entire life in service to others – not just in her volunteering, but as a nurse, and in many different jobs as a nurse, too, including serving as a head nurse in charge of a facility that cared for Alzheimer’s patients for the last 15 years of her career before she retired.

Mom is truly an Angel on Earth and I believe I know what she might tell you today if she were speaking to you because I have heard versions of the message growing up.

She would say ...

When you wake up each morning, you should think these things to yourself:

First, “What can I do today that will help my organization improve?” Whether that’s here at the U.S. NRC or at your organization.

Second, “What can I do today that will empower the people around me to be the best versions of themselves?” Now, that might be in a branch of the NRC, in your organization, or in organizations around the world.

And last, “What can I do today to improve myself, so that I can better support the people around me?”

For everyone here today and watching online, self-improvement should be a daily goal as we do our jobs as regulators to “meet the moment” here at the NRC, or as you fulfill the mission of your organization.

The people of the U.S. NRC, as well as regulators around the world, are a special group.

Everyone who works at the NRC plays an integral role, and what they do – what you do through your work each and every day – is important to the mission we all share through enabling the safe deployment and safe use of nuclear technologies: from licensing reactors to decommissioning, from fuels to medicine, and from inspecting those we regulate domestically to assisting and cooperating with our partners around the world.

I've shown this before: it's a bronze plaque I keep on my desk that was given to me by one of my Dad's radio station business partners following my election to the South Carolina House of Representatives back in 1988.

It's a replica of a quote President Ronald Reagan kept on his Oval Office desk that reads: "There is no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he doesn't mind who gets the credit."

I've done my best to live by that message in my personal and professional life.

President John F. Kennedy said something similar in his inaugural address in January of 1961, a quote that inspired a generation of children and adults to see the importance of public service and volunteerism.

I am one on those children.

He said, and I quote: "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country."

I absolutely love the selfless approach and attitude in each of these examples – the personal challenge statements and charges.

And it's this kind of selfless service that our workforce displays, on a daily basis, that helps us meet our mission and has led to some significant accomplishments over the past year.

Although I don't have time to list all of the things that the NRC staff and the commission accomplished since the last RIC, I do want to highlight a few:

First, Part 53, which provides a new regulatory framework for advanced reactors. It was just over a year ago that the staff sent up the draft version of Part 53 for the Commission to consider. It was over 1200 pages long, and it covered many technical topics from quantitative health objectives to ALARA.

Over the past year, the four Commission offices have worked closely together to enhance the draft rule into something that we can all agree on. My team also talked to a lot of stakeholders to get their feedback – some of you are in this room this morning.

I'm happy to report that on Monday, March 4th, we issued our final Staff Requirements Memorandum. I believe this document provides clear policy direction to the staff that will allow them to make the necessary changes so that we can publish the proposed rule in the Federal Register, hopefully toward the end of this year.

Chair Hanson, Commissioner Caputo, and Commissioner Crowell: I truly appreciate the collegial spirit displayed by each of you and your staffs in working with me and my team and I look forward to finalizing a rule that will be useable and useful.

Next, let me talk about the Advanced Nuclear Reactor Generic Environmental Impact Statement, or “ANR-GEIS.”

I voted on this last week and – although there are some details to work out – in my opinion, we’re headed toward a great result.

This could provide predictability and durability in our regulatory decisions going forward and could reduce the cost of advanced reactor environmental reviews by 20-45 percent, depending on the project.

Last Friday afternoon, I voted the License Renewal GEIS paper that was before the Commission, and I hope we will finish the SRM process for that paper very soon.

Next, from a staffing perspective, we successfully onboarded just under 300 new employees including our most recent cohort of 25 from the Nuclear Regulator Apprenticeship Network, or “NRAN” for short, which is our new training program for entry level employees.

Further, the NRC reconstituted our Minority-Serving Institutions Grants Program and provided awards of nearly one million dollars across four minority-serving institutions.

And we also signed or renewed bilateral arrangements with 16 countries, including several new regulatory counterparts.

By the way, this is the largest number of bilateral arrangements signed in a single year in the history of the NRC.

This year, 2024, is a big year too, because it’s the 50th anniversary of the NRC’s Resident Inspection Program! 50 years! Now that’s a big deal!

Thank you to our resident inspectors – those who serve today, and to anyone who has ever served as one!

We have at least two resident inspectors stationed at each of our 54 reactor sites across the country, and at least one resident inspector at both of our Category One fuel cycle facilities.

Last year, I had the privilege of serving as “resident for a day” at three of our sites. I’m planning on doing the same this year – and I must tell you, it’s not an easy job, so I’m glad we’ve got the ‘best of the best’ doing it!

As resident inspector for a day, I spent each day onsite shadowing and experiencing what resident inspectors do: showing up with them as early as 4:30 in the morning to observe the control room shift change and following them through every meeting and every inspection – both planned and unplanned.

I can tell you firsthand, all of our inspectors in the United States as well as inspectors around the world – truly the “boots on the ground” every day – are selfless in their service to the public.

Resident Inspectors live out selfless values each and every day in support of the NRC’s mission to provide “reasonable assurance of adequate protection and to protect the public and the environment.”

These inspectors live in, and are a part of, the communities that are home to the plants where they work. They are passionate about their work as well as about the role they play in the safe operation of the nuclear power plant or fuel facility they oversee. Or, to put it another way, to the public we serve in the United States these inspectors are the NRC.

I encourage those of you who work at the NRC, or are thinking about a career at the NRC, to consider the role of a resident inspector as a career or as a rotation opportunity.

There’s one resident inspector I would like to highlight this morning as a torchbearer for every other resident inspector out there, both here in the United States and around the world.

At this time, please help me recognize someone who is truly an Inspector’s inspector: Rogerio Reyes.

Rogerio has had an impressive career ... to say the least!

He started out at the NRC in Region 1 in 1994 and realized early on in his career how much he wanted to pursue being a resident inspector. So, after getting some experience at the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant, he joined Region 2, where he became a resident inspector at Turkey Point.

After that assignment, Rogerio served as the resident at Crystal River, St. Lucie, and then again at Turkey Point.

Rogerio, I sense a Florida theme here – no wonder they call you “Florida Man”!

Rogerio now provides vital coverage at various sites in Region 2, and mentors up-and-coming resident inspectors.

I will join Rogerio in a few minutes for a fireside chat.

Speaking of outstanding work, our resident inspectors conducted over 10,000 unique inspections across the US reactor fleet in 2023. 10,000!

Additionally, the NRC staff in Region 2 oversaw start-up testing at Vogtle Unit 3 and verified its safe transition to commercial operations, which took place on July 31st of last year, and Headquarters staff prepared the 103(g) letter authorizing fuel load at Vogtle Unit 4 as Vogtle Unit 4 continues start-up testing and approaches commercial operations this year.

The Commission issued a construction permit to Kairos for their Hermes 1 reactor, the first construction permit issued to a non-light-water reactor in over 50 years.

And the NRC issued a final rule (10 CFR 50.160) that offers a set of risk-informed emergency preparedness requirements for small modular reactors and other new technologies.

In terms of licensing, our staff completed nearly 800 licensing actions at reactors across the country, including new reactors.

Let me turn to the world of materials now.

In the United States, the NRC has an agreement program with the states.

This allows states in the program to assume portions of the NRC's regulatory authority through an agreement signed by the state's Governor and the NRC's Chair. Currently, 39 states are in the Agreement State program, with two more coming down the pike.

As you can imagine, this program involves a lot of coordination and communication between the States and the NRC.

When I think about the Agreement State program and when I talk to others about it, one name always comes up, and I want to highlight this person as the torch bearer for the National Materials Program this morning.

At this time, please say hello to another NRC great: Duncan White.

Duncan is certainly an expert in his field! He's an experienced health physicist and has been at the NRC for 33 years, working in various roles related to the agreement state program.

He started out in Region 1 as a materials inspector, a license reviewer, and a regional state agreement officer.

He was a supervisor for the agreement state program branch, and is now a senior technical expert in NMSS.

Duncan has been involved in constructing state agreements with the states of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Virginia, Wyoming, and he is currently working on agreements with Connecticut and Indiana, as well as a revised agreement with Wyoming.

Duncan and I will chat later, but before we leave the materials program, I want to highlight some of their accomplishments this year.

Staff oversaw the first (at least the first for the United States) successful restart of a conversion facility, the Honeywell plant, which had been in idle since 2017.

Staff continues to get ready for new fuels, too. From high-assay, low enriched uranium, or HALEU fuel, to TRISO [TRi-structural ISOtropic particle] fuel, from accident tolerant fuel to new fuel fabrication facilities, the NRC staff has been supporting and approving licensing actions for them all.

NRC inspectors on the materials side conducted over one thousand inspections this past year – ranging from fuel facilities to nuclear materials, and from spent fuel storage and transportation to decommissioning and low-level waste.

And the Agreement States conducted thousands more!

Oh yeah! Let's not forget about the newly organized Tribal program, which conducted Tribal outreach on a host of activities, including a first-of-a-kind meet-and-greet with the new Navajo Nation President, Doctor Buu Nygren.

In support of all that we do at the NRC – from Headquarters to the Regions and from the Commissioners' offices to those we regulate, our administrative staff support it all. They are truly selfless in their support of the work being done by the NRC.

Now, before I go any further, I want to personally thank my Admin team – Kim Lora and Patty Burbank. They keep me straight and on time, and they don't lose me when I travel, either. That's most important!

This morning, I had planned to introduce you, in person, to a regional Administrative Assistant who will serve as the torch bearer for all Admins here at the NRC, but due to a very late-breaking curve ball, Marilyn Evans, an Admin above Admins, was unable to travel.

Marilyn has been with the NRC almost 30 years. She has had, and continues to have, such a positive impact on so many people.

Marilyn has been an administrative assistant at Vogtle Units 1 and 2, Savannah River's MOX fuel facility, Vogtle Units 3 and 4, and Plant Hatch. She's even served at many of these sites at the same time!

Marilyn is a mentor and trainer to administrative assistants at other sites, too. She's not finished, either, because she'll soon move from Region 2 to Region 1, to serve as the full-time administrative assistant at Beaver Valley.

I have something for you, Marilyn, so I look forward to catching up with you soon!

Each of the areas I have mentioned – the reactor, materials, and corporate support programs – are critically important to our mission of providing “reasonable assurance of adequate protection to protect the public and the environment”.

And, they are important around the world, too.

If you saw my RIC speech last year, you may remember that I highlighted the importance of international cooperation following Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.

IAEA Director General Grossi was here, and he echoed those remarks. And my fellow Commissioners and I had a chance to meet with Chairman Korikov of the State Nuclear Regulatory Inspectorate of Ukraine to hear firsthand about the challenges of performing their mission in an active warzone.

We got to hear first-hand from the Ukrainian delegation about the atrocities taking place in their country and the extreme personal sacrifices that they and their families were making and are still making today.

It was an eye-opening and sobering experience.

To me, this drove home the point of how important it is for the NRC to strengthen and maintain our partnerships with like-minded countries around the world.

To that end, my team and I have traveled to: Romania, Poland, Sweden, Finland, Ghana, France, and Canada.

Each of these countries are different and have their own ways of doing things, but from what I saw, they have a lot in common with the United States.

First, they understand that nuclear power brings important benefits, such as zero carbon emissions and energy independence.

Second, they recognize that the benefits of nuclear energy can only be realized if that energy is safe – and having a strong, independent regulator is key to achieving that safety.

And finally, they are keen on cooperating and collaborating with international partners such as the United States – and they want to work with other countries, too, not against them.

I'd like to tell you about a materials inspector I met at a cancer hospital in Ghana, who demonstrated the spirit of international cooperation and collaboration.

Her name is Cynthia Engmann, and she is a Senior Research Scientist with the Ghanaian Nuclear Regulatory Authority.

I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Engmann when we toured the Sweden-Ghana Medical Center back in October of last year.

During that tour, I got a chance to learn that she has spent the last 16 years performing safety inspections of medical, industrial, and research institutions in Ghana.

She's also published several papers on patient radiation optimization, and is an adjunct lecturer at the University of Ghana's School of Nuclear and Allied Science where many students have benefited from her instruction and mentorship. And, as someone who has been the beneficiary of nuclear medicine, I have a deep appreciation for the work that Cynthia does.

In just a few moments, I am going to join Roger, Duncan, and Andrea Veil for a short dialogue, but before I do, I want to thank you – the heart of the U.S. NRC – as well as regulators around the world, for what you do for nuclear safety, and for what you are doing to enable the safe deployment, and safe use, of nuclear technologies around the globe.

This is a unique moment in time, a special opportunity to make a difference and “meet the moment” before us. And you're on the way to doing just that.

You are making a difference, but we can do more.

Each-and-every-day, what you do has a positive impact here and around the world.

What you do through your work will help make the world safer.

Your work will help countries become more self-reliant, more secure, and more energy independent.

Your work will help provide incredibly effective medicines to cure diseases here and around the globe.

What you do will help countries provide food.

Your work will help people around the world who have never had electricity or clean water get it, which will also provide many more opportunities for children to grow, learn, and prosper.

So, thank you, thank you, thank you for your work.

Because of what you do, plants are safe. They are safe to build, and safe to operate.

Your efforts, your public service, your passion for what nuclear safety regulation is about here and around the world, provides “reasonable assurance of adequate protection” and enables the safe deployment, and safe use, of nuclear technologies.

Keep in mind the words of President Reagan and President Kennedy, and even my Mom, as you continue in your selfless service and make a difference meeting this moment in time.

Consider what you can do each day to help your organization, to empower those you work with to be the best version of themselves, and to improve yourself in ways that allow you to help make others successful in what they do!

When you do those things, when you live those things, good things happen – and success for you, for your organization, for people here and around the world, will be the by-product.

Thank you for your time and attention this morning.

Now, let’s get on with the fireside chat.