

Remarks of
Dr. Richard A. Meserve
Swearing-in Ceremony as
Chairman of the
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
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Let me spend a moment to share my thoughts with you in my first moments as a commissioner. I approach the job with a mixture of both excitement and, quite frankly, apprehension. Both feelings arise from the same cause – namely, that the NRC confronts a variety of interesting and difficult challenges. Let me just enumerate a few.

As I am sure you are fully aware, we are in the middle of a significant restructuring of the utility industry. In a growing number of states, the competitive market determines the price of electricity and thus profitability for all forms of electricity generation is dependent on achieving economically efficient operations. This has important implications for the NRC's work.

On the one hand, the changed financial environment reinforces the need for the NRC to be vigilant in demanding safe operations by licensees. The NRC must assure that the pressures to reduce costs do not become incentives to cut corners on safety. Protection of the public health and safety will always remain our transcendent mission and responsibility.

On the other hand, this changed environment reinforces the need for the NRC to regulate efficiently – to regulate in a fashion that imposes the minimum degree of burden consistent with getting the job done. This implies a careful approach both in crafting new regulatory initiatives – making sure that the benefits outweigh the costs – and a willingness to cast a critical eye on existing policies and practices. Moreover, managerial oversight is necessary to make sure that the policy decisions made in the agency's conference rooms are translated into practice at the operational level. I believe that the NRC is started in the right direction in its efforts to move to risk-informed regulation and to revise its procedures, but far more work remains to be done.

In the materials and waste area, similar challenges are looming. In the years ahead, the agency will have to grapple with the problems associated with the regulation and licensing of a disposal site for high-level waste – a task that will present very thorny technical, legal, social, and political problems. The consideration of issues associated with Yucca Mountain are sure to be trying and difficult. It will also be necessary and appropriate to apply in the materials context some of the lessons learned from the development of a risk-informed approach to the regulation of reactors.

There is also a need to maintain a connection to the broader international community. As the recent incident in Japan has revealed, an event anywhere in the world can cause heightened concern about nuclear-related enterprises everywhere. As a result, the NRC

needs to continue to work with its counterparts abroad to advance nuclear safety throughout the globe. Moreover, in a world that is awash with weapons-grade plutonium and highly enriched uranium, we need to work internationally to find ways to reduce the risks that these materials present.

Finally, there is an overarching obligation to meet all these missions in a fashion that justifiably enhances public confidence. Decisions must be fair, and be perceived to be fair, and they must be achieved in an efficient fashion. If the regulatory process is so needlessly time-consuming that delay itself determines the outcome, then the goal of fairness is not being met and the Commission has failed in its obligations. But, at the same time, the NRC can not slight the significant role that Congress gave to the public in NRC processes. The NRC staff and the regulated community can benefit from public participation because the public may often illuminate issues in ways that would otherwise escape scrutiny. Moreover, the public will not accept the legitimacy of decisions from which it is excluded. Thus, the NRC must approach all of the challenges in a way that includes the affected public in ways that are meaningful and that contribute to sound decisions, but that do not cause needless delay.

Fortunately, although the challenges are large, I believe that the NRC is up to the task. Under the very able leadership of my predecessors and the careful work of my colleagues on the Commission, the NRC is on the right track. The agency has launched initiatives to address many of these challenges. And, it has worked successfully to improve communications with members of the public, the regulated industry, and the Congress. I see my role as largely one of continuing along the directions that have already been charted, at least in part, by my fellow commissioners and by my predecessors. Their skills and foresight will make my job easier.

Perhaps the most important ingredient to success, however, is the NRC staff. I am fully aware that the 17th and 18th floors of One White Flint Plaza do not stand alone, but are held up by the 16 floors that are below them and are buttressed by Two White Flint and by the Regional offices. Fortunately, the Commission has the benefit of an extremely dedicated and highly qualified staff. As a practicing lawyer, I have had the opportunity to deal with agencies throughout the government and, in my view, the NRC staff stands ahead of that of any other agency in the competence, fairness, and skill of its personnel. The NRC staff is a resource that deserves far more appreciation than it has generally received. With its able assistance, the challenges confronting the agency in the years' ahead will be successfully conquered.

To my old colleagues, let me say that I hope our paths will cross again and that you will stay in touch. To my new colleagues, I welcome the opportunity to work with you. Thank you all for joining me today for this ceremony.