



NRC NEWS

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Prepared Remarks of Commissioner Kristine L. Svinicki
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Thank you. I am very pleased to be here.

I must begin by mentioning that I speak from the perspective of a nuclear regulator, which may be obvious after that introduction but bears repeating for this very diverse audience. In the United States, the Department of Energy is responsible for promoting the use of nuclear technology and materials, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission – my agency – is responsible for regulating the safe and secure civilian use of nuclear technology and materials. I should also note that my remarks today are my own personal views, and that they may not represent the collective view of the Commission.

It is important for me to make those clarifications, particularly in light of the theme of this conference: “Enhancing Our World Through Nuclear Technology.” Rather than focusing on this specific theme, I will focus on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, what makes us – in my view – a successful regulator, and then give you an update on new reactor license applications.

As many of you probably know, our agency licenses and regulates nuclear power plants; fuel cycle facilities such as uranium recovery, enrichment, and processing; and the transport and storage of nuclear waste. We also license the use of nuclear materials for medical, industrial, and other purposes. In this forum, with so many fellow nuclear professionals from around the globe, I think it is also important to note that the U.S. Congress, in creating the NRC nearly 35 years ago, made the choice that, in the United States, a single agency – the NRC – would regulate both the safety and the security of commercial nuclear facilities and materials. In my experience, this was a good decision, since it allows a single body to take safety and security requirements into consideration in developing its regulatory oversight program.

We have other government partners, of course, in this important work. An important element of our regulatory structure is the establishment of what are referred to as “Agreement States.” Let me explain further.

In some cases, states have applied for – and the NRC has granted – the authority for states to regulate certain categories of nuclear materials under what is known as the “Agreement State” program. Currently, there are 36 “Agreement States” in the U.S. that regulate the safety of source material, reactor fission byproducts, and quantities of special nuclear material not sufficient to form a critical mass. The Agreement States exercise their licensing and enforcement actions for such materials under the direction of their governors and in a manner that is compatible with the licensing and enforcement programs of the NRC and that is reviewed by the NRC on a periodic basis.

With that as a backdrop, let me now talk about three factors that I believe have made the NRC an effective agency. First, we have worked hard to be an efficient and timely regulator. In 1989, our agency began establishing the new combined construction permit and operating license application process for commercial nuclear reactors. You will frequently hear this referred to as the “Part 52” licensing process which sounds mysterious but really just describes the section of our regulations where it is laid out. The combined license application – in conjunction with design certifications and early site permits – subjects new reactor applications to a more efficient and predictable licensing framework, with no compromise to safety or security and while retaining opportunities for vigorous public participation.

On that point, the NRC strives to maintain a high standard of public accountability. Although always observant of the appropriate control of proprietary and security-related information, the NRC views nuclear regulation as the public’s business and, as such, we believe it should be transacted in a fair, predictable, and open manner. The public needs to be informed about our regulatory processes and to have the opportunity for meaningful intervention by participating in these regulatory processes under a framework that is prescribed, predictable, and clearly understood by all parties. In addition, the public should insist that the agency communicate clearly about the proper management of nuclear materials – its risks and its benefits.

And that brings me to the third point: understanding and evaluating risk. At the NRC we have used risk assessment in some form for a long time to focus attention on areas that are identified as the most risk-significant. What this means, in simple terms, is that we do not treat all issues equally, but rather our approach weighs their safety significance through a risk-assessment program. This approach allows us to make consistent and informed decisions, and has contributed, in my view, to the NRC’s reputation for objectivity and independence.

There are other factors that I believe have contributed to the enviable nuclear safety record in the United States. Worthy of mention, and significant among them, are the efforts by industry to police itself through the Institute of Nuclear Power Operations or “INPO.” This is a private organization created by industry to promote excellence and high standards of safety. INPO was created in response to failures uncovered by the Three Mile Island accident in 1979 – just as the World Association of Nuclear Operators was created in response to the events at Chernobyl. The work of INPO embodies the industry’s willingness to strive for excellence. In my view, the industry’s sustained commitment to striving for excellence in operations, complemented by the existence of a strong and independent regulator, provides a foundation for public confidence in the safety of nuclear power.

Let me now turn to the future of nuclear energy in the United States. So far, the NRC has received – by my count, although the numbers have been changing frequently – 17 combined license applications for 26 potential new reactors. As you are probably aware, these are the first new reactor license applications to be submitted in decades. These applications represent several different designs. On that point, there may be some who wish the push towards standardization would have driven the number of new designs down to one or two, but I think the ability to choose among designs and sizes of reactors allows applicants to tailor their technology selection to whichever best suits their needs. This could also provide for greater technological diversity in any future fleet – which is a potential strength, not a weakness. Even with multiple new designs, there is still the potential for a greater degree of standardization among the new reactor applications under review compared to the current 104 operating reactors in the U.S. – almost every one of which is different.

The interest in new reactors is – not surprisingly – accompanied by an interest in other types of licensing actions related to nuclear materials. So, I can also report that the NRC is experiencing an increase in licensing activities for uranium recovery and fuel processing facilities.

Clearly, this presents our agency with very significant challenges as we proceed to review these applications in a timely manner. And the truth is, it has not been easy, but we have been, and are, making tremendous efforts. In recent years, the NRC has hired more staff and the NRC management several years ago had the foresight to begin planning for a separate Office of New Reactors, which now has a staff of over 400 people.

Agency-wide, the NRC used to hire 30-50 new people per year. Beginning in 2006, the NRC began a phased hiring of 600 additional full-time employees over a three-year period, principally to accommodate the influx of new licensing work. In addition, we hired another 600 people to compensate for employees who are retiring. Although hiring trends have flattened significantly at this point, this represents a large investment in new “human capital” at the NRC, and was a significant undertaking for the agency.

I mention these figures because the last time there was an expansion in nuclear power in the U.S. was 30 years ago. The people who were hired at the NRC then are now retiring, and one of our ongoing challenges is transferring their knowledge to the next generation of employees. We have invested time and attention in capturing this knowledge and transferring it to the next generation of agency staff – through formal knowledge management systems and through formal and informal mentoring relationships between staff – but this area will require our sustained focus.

On the subject of the agency’s staff, I would be remiss if I did not mention that the NRC was recently voted the Best to Place to Work in the Federal Government, for the second time in a row. This is something that the women and men of the NRC can take great pride in – since this honor is awarded based on surveys of the attitudes and views of the staff themselves. It reflects the kind of positive and high-performing work environment that they create for each other – everyday – and that their management and their Commission supports them in making possible.

Before I conclude, I would like to stress one key point.

The resurgence of interest in future nuclear power plants has only been made possible by the past and present safe and reliable performance of the current fleet of operating reactors. In my day-to-day work, I remain focused on the NRC's core value – the protection of public health and safety, and our security. As we gather here, as a community of nuclear professionals, I know the same commitment is shared by so many in this room. We challenge ourselves, continually, to resist complacency, maintain our questioning attitude, and demand sufficient rigor in all we do. Only in this environment can opportunities for “Enhancing the World Through Nuclear Technology” take root.

Thank you.