

WRITTEN STATEMENT
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TO THE
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND WATER
UNITED STATES SENATE
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Chairman Feinstein, Ranking Member Alexander, and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to address the response of the United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to the recent tragic events in Japan. People across the country and around the world who have been touched by the magnitude and scale of this disaster are closely following the events in Japan and the repercussions in this country and in other countries.

I traveled to Japan over the past weekend, and just returned yesterday. I wanted to convey a message of support and cooperation to our Japanese counterparts there and to assess the current situation. I also met with senior Japanese government and TEPCO officials, and consulted with our NRC team of experts who are in Japan as part of our assistance effort.

I would first like to reiterate my condolences to all those who have been affected by the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Our hearts go out to all who have been dealing with the aftermath of these natural disasters, and we are mindful of the long and difficult road they will face in recovering. We know that the people of Japan are resilient and strong, and we have every confidence that they will come through this horrific time and move forward, with resolve, to

rebuild their vibrant country. Our agency stands together with the people of Japan at this most difficult and challenging time.

The NRC is an independent agency, with approximately 4000 staff. We play a critically important role in protecting the American people and the environment. Our agency sets the rules by which commercial nuclear power plants operate, and nuclear materials are used in thousands of academic, medical and industrial settings in the United States. We have at least two resident inspectors who work full-time at every nuclear plant in the country, and we are proud to have world-class scientists, engineers and professionals representing nearly every discipline.

Since Friday, March 11, when the earthquake and tsunami struck, the NRC's headquarters 24-hour Emergency Operations Center has been fully activated, with staffing augmented to monitor and analyze events at nuclear power plants in Japan. At the request of the Japanese government, and through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the NRC sent a team of its technical experts to provide on-the-ground support, and we have been in continual contact with them. Within the United States, the NRC has been working closely with other Federal agencies as part of our government's response to the situation.

During these past several weeks, our staff has remained focused on our essential safety and security mission. I want to recognize their tireless efforts and their critical contributions to the U.S. response to assist Japan. In spite of the evolving situation, the long hours, and the intensity of efforts over the past week, NRC staff has approached their responsibilities with dedication, determination and professionalism, and I am incredibly proud of their efforts. The American people also can be proud of the commitment and dedication within the Federal workforce, which is exemplified by our staff every day.

The NRC's primary responsibility is to ensure the adequate protection of the public health and safety of the American people. Toward that end, we have been very closely monitoring the activities in Japan and reviewing all currently available information. Review of this information, combined with our ongoing inspection and licensing oversight, gives us confidence that the U.S. plants continue to operate safely. To date, there has been no reduction in the licensing or oversight function of the NRC as it relates to any of the U.S. licensees.

Our agency has a long history of conservative regulatory decision-making. We have been intelligently using risk insights to help inform our regulatory process, and, for more than 35 years of civilian nuclear power in this country, we have never stopped requiring improvements to plant designs, and modifying our regulatory framework as we learn from operating experience.

Despite the very high level of support being provided by the NRC in response to the events in Japan, we continue to remain focused on our domestic responsibilities.

I'd like to begin with a brief overview of our immediate and continuing response to the events in Japan. I then want to further discuss the reasons for our continuing confidence in the safety of the U. S. commercial nuclear reactor fleet, and the path forward for the NRC in order to learn all the lessons we can, in light of these events.

On Friday, March 11th, an earthquake hit Japan, resulting in the shutdown of more than 10 reactors. The ensuing tsunami appears to have caused the loss of normal and emergency alternating current power to the six unit Fukushima Daiichi site. It is those six units that have received the majority of our attention since that time. Units One, Two, and

Three were in operation at the time of the earthquake. Units Four, Five, and Six were in previously scheduled outages.

Shortly after 4:00 AM EDT on Friday, March 11th, the NRC Emergency Operations Center made the first call, informing NRC management of the earthquake and the potential impact on U.S. plants. We went into the monitoring mode at our Emergency Operations Center, and the NRC's first concern was possible impacts of the tsunami on U.S. plants and radioactive materials on the West Coast, and in Hawaii, Alaska, and U. S. Territories in the Pacific. We were in communication with licensees and NRC resident inspectors at Diablo Canyon Power Plant and San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station in California, and the Radiation Control Program Directors for California, Washington, Oregon and Hawaii.

On that same day, we began interactions with our Japanese regulatory counterparts and dispatched two experts to Japan to help at the U.S. embassy in Tokyo. By Monday, March 14, we had dispatched a total of 11 NRC staff to provide technical support to the American embassy and the Japanese government. We have subsequently rotated in additional staff to continue our on-the-ground assistance in Japan. The areas of focus for this team are: 1) to assist the Japanese government and respond to requests from our Japanese regulatory counterparts; and 2) to support the U. S. ambassador and the U.S. government assistance effort.

On Wednesday, March 16, we collaborated with other U. S. government agencies and decided to advise American citizens to evacuate within a 50-mile range around the plant. This decision was a prudent course of action and would be consistent with what we would do under similar circumstances in the United States. This evacuation range was predicated on a combination of the information that we had available at the time, which indicated the possibility that reactor cores and spent fuel pools may have been compromised, and hypothetical

calculations of the approximate activity available for release from one reactor and two spent-fuel pools at a four-reactor site.

We have an extensive range of stakeholders with whom we have ongoing interaction regarding the Japan situation, including the White House, Congressional staff, our state regulatory counterparts, a number of other federal agencies, and international regulatory bodies around the world.

The NRC response in Japan and our Emergency Operations Center continue with the dedicated efforts of over 250 NRC staff on a rotating basis. The entire agency is coordinating and working together in response to this event so that we can provide assistance to Japan while continuing the vital activities necessary to fulfill our domestic responsibilities.

It is important to note that the U. S. government has an extensive network of radiation monitors across this country. Monitoring at nuclear power plants and the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) system has not identified any radiation levels that effect public health and safety in this country. In fact, natural background radiation from sources such as rocks, the sun, and buildings, is 100,000 times more than doses attributed to any level that has been detected in the U.S. to date. Therefore, based on current data, we feel confident that there is no reason for concern in the United States regarding radioactive releases from Japan.

There are many factors that assure us of ongoing domestic reactor safety. We have, since the beginning of the regulatory program in the United States, used a philosophy of Defense-in-Depth, which recognizes that nuclear reactors require the highest standards of design, construction, oversight, and operation, and does not rely on any single layer of protection for public health and safety. Designs for every individual reactor in this country take into account site-specific factors and include a detailed evaluation for natural events, such as

earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, and tsunamis, as they relate to that site.

There are multiple physical barriers to radiation in every reactor design. Additionally, there are both diverse and redundant safety systems that are required to be maintained in operable condition and frequently tested to ensure that the plant is in a high condition of readiness to respond to any situation.

We have taken advantage of the lessons learned from previous operating experience to implement a program of continuous improvement for the U. S. reactor fleet. We have learned from experience across a wide range of situations, including most significantly, the Three Mile Island accident in 1979. As a result of those lessons learned, we have significantly revised emergency planning requirements and emergency operating procedures. We have addressed many human factors issues regarding how control room employees operate the plant, added new requirements for hydrogen control to help prevent explosions inside of containment, and created requirements for enhanced control room displays of the status of pumps and valves.

The NRC has a post-accident sampling system that enables the monitoring of radioactive material release and possible fuel degradation. One of the most significant changes after Three Mile Island was an expansion of the Resident Inspector Program, which now has at least two full-time NRC inspectors on site at each nuclear power plant. These inspectors have unfettered access to all licensees' activities related to nuclear safety and security.

As a result of operating experience and ongoing research programs, we have developed requirements for severe accident management guidelines. These are components and procedures developed to ensure that, in the event all of the above-described precautions failed and a severe accident occurred, the plant would still protect

public health and safety. The requirements for severe accident management have been in effect for many years and are frequently evaluated by the NRC inspection program.

As a result of the events of September 11, 2001, we identified important pieces of equipment that, regardless of the cause of a significant fire or explosion at a plant, the NRC requires licensees to have available and staged in advance, as well as new procedures and policies to help deal with a severe situation.

Our program of continuous improvement, based on operating experience, will now include evaluation of the significant events in Japan and what we can learn from them. We already have begun enhancing inspection activities through temporary instructions to our inspection staff, including the resident inspectors and the region-based inspectors in our four Regional offices, to look at licensees' readiness to deal with both design-basis accidents and beyond-design-basis accidents.

We have also issued an information notice to licensees to make them aware of the events in Japan, and the kinds of activities we believe they should be engaged in to verify their readiness. It is expected that licensees review the information related to their capabilities to mitigate conditions that result from severe accidents, including the loss of significant operational and safety systems, to ensure that they are in effect and operational.

During the past 20 years, there have been a number of new rulemakings that have enhanced the domestic fleet's preparedness against some of the problems we are seeing in Japan. The "station blackout" rule requires every plant in this country to analyze what the plant response would be if it were to lose all alternating current so that it could respond using batteries for a period of time, and then have procedures in place to restore alternating current to the site and provide cooling to the core.

The hydrogen rule requires modifications to reduce the impacts of hydrogen generated for beyond-design-basis events and core damage. There are equipment qualification rules that require equipment, including pumps and valves, to remain operable under the kinds of environmental temperature and radiation conditions that you would see under a design-basis accident.

With regard to the type of containment design used by the most heavily damaged plants in Japan, the NRC has had a Boiling Water Reactor Mark I Containment Improvement Program since the late 1980s. This program required installation of hardened vent systems for containment pressure relief, as well as enhanced reliability of the automatic depressurization system.

A final factor that underpins our belief in the ongoing safety of the U. S. fleet is the emergency preparedness and planning requirements in place that provide ongoing training, testing, and evaluations of licensees' emergency preparedness programs. In coordination with our federal partner, the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), these activities include extensive interaction with state and local governments, as those programs are evaluated and tested on a periodic basis.

Along with our confidence in the safety of U.S. nuclear power plants, our agency has a responsibility to the American people to undertake a systematic and methodical review of the safety of our domestic facilities, in light of the natural disaster and the resulting nuclear situation in Japan.

Examining all available information is an essential part of the effort to analyze the event and understand its impact on Japan and its implications for the United States. Our focus is always on keeping nuclear plants and radioactive materials in this country safe and secure.

On Monday, March 21, my colleagues on the Commission and I met to review the status of the situation in Japan and identify the steps needed to conduct that review. We consequently decided to establish a senior level agency task force to conduct a comprehensive review of our processes and regulations to determine whether the agency should make additional improvements to our regulatory system, and to make recommendations to the Commission for its policy direction.

The review will be conducted in both a short-term and a longer-term timeframe. The short-term review has already begun, and the task force will brief the Commission at 30, 60 and 90 day intervals, to identify potential or preliminary near-term operational or regulatory issues. The task force then will undertake a longer-term review as soon as NRC has sufficient information from the events in Japan. That longer-term review will be completed in six months from the beginning of the evaluation.

The task force will evaluate all technical and policy issues related to the event to identify additional potential research, generic issues, changes to the reactor oversight process, rulemakings, and adjustments to the regulatory framework that may warrant action by the NRC. We also expect to evaluate potential interagency issues, such as emergency preparedness, and examine the applicability of any lessons learned to non-operating reactors and materials licensees. We expect to seek input from all key stakeholders during this process. A report with appropriate recommendations will be provided to the Commission within six months of the start of this evaluation. Both the 90-day and final reports will be made

publicly available.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that we continue to make our domestic responsibilities for licensing and oversight of the U.S. licensees our top priority and that the U.S. plants continue to operate safely. In light of the events in Japan, there will be a near-term evaluation of their relevance to the U.S. fleet, and we are continuing to gather the information necessary to take a longer, more comprehensive and thorough look at the events in Japan and their lessons for us. Based on these efforts, we will take all appropriate actions necessary to ensure the continuing safety of the American people.

Chairman Feinstein, Ranking Member Alexander, and Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you. I look forward to continuing to work with you to advance the NRC's important safety mission.