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Organization of Agreement States 2026 Annual Meeting **Keynote Address: Strengthening Partnerships for America's Future in Nuclear Energy** **August 31, 2026** **Chairman Ho Nieh** **(remarks as prepared for delivery)**

Introduction

Good morning, everyone.

Thank you, Governor Lee, for hosting this year's Organization of Agreement States (OAS) annual meeting in the great state of Tennessee. And congratulations on Tennessee's selection as one of five states to move to the next step in the Department of Energy's Nuclear Lifecycle Innovation Campus (NLIC) initiative—aimed at building nuclear ecosystems from the front end to the back end.

Tennessee has a strong foundation for success with Oak Ridge National Laboratory, the Tennessee Valley Authority and the University of Tennessee, all having decades of experience with nuclear technologies.

Thank you to OAS for the opportunity to spend time with you. You are an important partner to the NRC and it is an honor to provide this keynote address. Effective partnerships are essential to the future of American nuclear energy, and that will be a theme throughout my remarks.

I also want to recognize my Commission colleagues attending this conference, Commissioners David Wright and Matt Marzano. David and Matt bring important experience and perspective to the Commission, and I appreciate their commitment to the NRC's safety mission. Their presence underscores the value of the OAS partnership with the NRC.

Finally, thank you to all the nuclear safety professionals in the room today. Your dedication to public service and commitment to safety are why America has trust in nuclear and radiation technologies.

A Defining Moment

We stand at a defining moment for nuclear safety regulation.

America urgently needs more energy due to artificial intelligence, data centers and industrial growth. Nuclear is seen as essential to our energy security. This is evident in the actions of

President Trump, the bipartisan support of Congress, the substantial capital investment and the increasing public support for nuclear power.

States are an important part of this story. Like Tennessee, many states are reconsidering how nuclear energy fits into their strategies for economic growth and energy security.

The conditions are ideal for America to lead the world in nuclear energy.

As America's nuclear safety regulator, the NRC's role is clear—our safety decisions must be credible, predictable and timely. Accordingly, the NRC is making major changes driven by Congress and the President. This is the most comprehensive period of regulatory reform in over 50 years.

Let me say this clearly: the NRC will not be an impediment to nuclear energy innovation. A new NRC has emerged—one that is enabling and accelerating the safe and secure deployment of new nuclear and expansion of existing capacity.

Return to NRC

This pivotal moment is one of the reasons I chose to return to the NRC. Nuclear energy has been part of my life for a long time—from when I was a child. My father was a nuclear welder, and he steered my interest toward this field.

Let me share a quick story. My father and I have the same name. I remember many years ago, when I was getting my dosimetry at a nuclear power plant, the technician looked at the details on her computer and said to me, “You don’t look like you’re 65 years old.” I was in my 40s at the time, so I took that as a huge compliment and said, “Thank you.”

That memory stayed with me because our work in nuclear energy spans generations. The decisions we make today build on the work of those before us—and they shape what the next generation will inherit.

Some of you may know I previously served at the NRC. I returned because of how much the NRC's safety mission matters in this moment. I have been back for about nine months. Let me share some observations about what I believe is the same and what is different since I left the agency five years ago to work in industry, where I saw the NRC from a different perspective.

What is the Same—Three Things

Let's start with what is the same. Here are three things.

First and foremost, safety remains our top priority. Full stop. We exist to protect public health and safety. The NRC is not compromising safety for speed. The NRC is not a rubber stamp.

Second, our technical independence remains solid. We make and we own our regulatory decisions. But independence does not mean isolation. We coordinate with our Federal, State and international partners. And like all executive branch agencies, we follow government-wide

policies. When it comes to achieving our national energy goals, the NRC is an integral part of Team USA.

The distinction between independence and isolation is important when we talk about partnership. Partnership does not mean surrendering our authorities or responsibilities. The NRC and Agreement States have our own decisions to make. Effective partnerships help us make better and more informed decisions.

Third, our people remain our greatest strength. Every day, the competent and dedicated NRC staff deliver on a safety mission that is essential to America's energy security and public trust in nuclear technologies.

I know the same is true of the Agreement States. The National Materials Program depends on experienced state regulators exercising sound judgment every day. Your organizations, regulations and processes matter, but it is your people who make the entire system work.

The NRC is increasing our efforts to recruit, retain and develop our people. So, please tell a friend the NRC is hiring and it's a great place to work.

What is Different—Three Things

So, what is different? Here are three things.

First—the NRC now operates under a new mission that emphasizes enabling along with safety. And many more staff embrace this enabling concept than when I was last at the NRC, when we pursued a similar vision. In the regulatory context, enabling is the principled application of our authorities to achieve national goals and benefits from the safe use of nuclear technologies.

Here is what I believe an enabling regulation is.

Enabling is aligning our regulations with actual risks and operational needs.

Enabling is adapting our frameworks to new technologies.

Enabling is adding regulatory flexibility where safety is maintained.

Enabling is a mindset. It is not a shortcut. It is not a compromise. It is how we fulfill our safety commitment to the public in a changing world.

Second difference—the NRC leadership is more directionally aligned than when I was last at the NRC. While many of our leaders are new to their roles, their alignment has produced meaningful results in a relatively short period of time. We are focusing on sustaining leadership alignment and excellence. I will say more on that later.

Third difference—the NRC's interagency coordination is more visible and substantive than before.

Our work is part of a deliberate, coordinated federal effort to reestablish America as a leader in nuclear energy. The Department of Energy is investing in and developing the industrial base

around the entire nuclear lifecycle. The NRC is developing predictable and efficient licensing frameworks to make that industrial base possible.

Two agencies, working as partners, each in their own lanes but heading to the same destination—America leading the world again in nuclear energy.

And we have a similar partnership with the Department of War to deploy microreactors for resilient energy for our military.

The NRC is establishing regulatory pathways to leverage the experience and information from DOE and DOW programs for efficient commercial licensing of these technologies.

These effective Federal partnerships work because of clear responsibilities, open exchange of information and the application of our unique authorities to achieve larger national objectives.

Delivering Results

So, what has stayed the same and what has changed are working together to produce impressive results. Here are some results over the past year:

We finalized Part 53—a first-of-a-kind risk-informed, technology-inclusive licensing framework—21 months ahead of schedule.

We issued a construction permit for a non-light-water advanced reactor nine months ahead of schedule—TerraPower’s project in Kemmerer, Wyoming.

We approved a first-ever restart pathway for a permanently shut-down reactor—the Palisades plant in Michigan. Two more restarts are under review.

We renewed 13 operating reactor licenses—keeping 12 GW on the grid for another 20 years. The two most recent renewals were completed in under twelve months.

We issued a license for a TRISO fuel fabrication facility—right here in Tennessee—several months ahead of schedule.

We launched a regulatory framework for fusion.

And we prepared 28 Executive Order 14300 draft rules.

This is what an enabling regulator looks like. These results are not accidental. They reflect an intentional shift in how we do business.

This is not incremental change. We are fundamentally changing how we license and oversee nuclear facilities. The new regulatory frameworks we are building will set the standards for nuclear safety in America for decades. And what we do here will influence regulatory approaches around the world.

Partnership With the Agreement States

Writing new regulations is only the beginning. The real work ahead of us is implementing them successfully. And for many of these new rules, we cannot do that without you.

The NRC-Agreement State relationship is one of the longest-standing partnerships in nuclear regulation. Forty Agreement States, with Indiana seeking to become the 41st, regulate the vast majority of radioactive materials in America. We share a national safety mission but we carry it out through different organizations, different authorities and different regulatory programs.

The Integrated Materials Performance Evaluation Program (IMPEP) is a great example of how that partnership works. The NRC and Agreement States evaluate each other's programs using common performance criteria to provide confidence that the National Materials Program continues to protect the public and maintains the compatibility needed for a coherent national system.

NRC just had its IMPEP in June. I love this because it shows that the Federal regulator is not standing above the system grading everyone else. We subject our own materials program to the same evaluation framework. And we appreciate the feedback we received because it will help us continuously improve.

In this period of major reform, the NRC-Agreement State partnership is particularly important. The NRC's proposed rule changes affect radiation protection, materials licensing, security, transportation and low-level waste disposal. Some changes eliminate requirements that no longer provide a safety benefit. Others move us toward more risk-informed, performance-based approaches. Nearly all of them have implications for Agreement State programs.

Part 20 is a good example. We are proposing changes to a radiation protection framework that has existed for decades. We know these changes will affect your regulations, your inspectors and your licensees. Your technical input is essential as we work through the proposed rule and guidance.

As a valued partner to the NRC, I am confident OAS will provide meaningful feedback on our proposed rules when you see implementation problems, compatibility issues or unintended consequences. Please challenge our thinking.

The measure of success is not whether NRC publishes final rules on schedule. Success is measured by whether the rules are implemented effectively through a coherent National Materials Program and ultimately a public that remains protected.

Partnership does not mean we will always agree. It means we share a common safety objective. And we respect and value each other's expertise as we work through our differences.

Global Regulatory Reform and Partnerships

I mentioned that what we do here will influence regulatory approaches around the world. The United States is not alone in regulatory reform. Many countries are seeking similar reforms—Canada, Finland, France, Japan, Sweden, the United Kingdom, among others. These countries also want faster and more efficient safety decisions from their nuclear regulator to accelerate deployment.

This creates more opportunities for partnership.

The GE Vernova Hitachi BWRX-300 small modular reactor (SMR) is a great example. That SMR is already under construction in Canada. TVA's construction permit for the same SMR is under NRC review for deployment at the Clinch River site here in Tennessee. NRC is partnering with the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission on joint technical reviews and sharing construction experience. This partnership will help America deploy these SMRs more efficiently.

We also have a trilateral cooperation agreement with Canada and the United Kingdom to work together where possible to avoid unnecessary duplication. I believe international partnerships like these are models for the future of the global nuclear industry.

Chairman Priorities

Let me pivot to my three priorities for ensuring that the NRC's reforms are durable.

First priority—core mission delivery with safety, efficiency and speed.

Our safety mission is our top priority. Understanding what truly drives safety is something I learned early in my NRC career.

Another quick story. During my first few weeks on the job as an NRC resident inspector, a senior inspector took me out on a plant tour. At one point he said something that has stayed with me for my entire career.

He said, "We can go out and find violations of NRC requirements. There are some we really care about—and there are others that don't require a lot of our time."

That statement taught me two lessons.

First, not all regulatory issues are equal.

Second, as regulators, we can choose where we spend our time—and where we compel licensees to spend theirs.

Those lessons are at the heart of risk-informed regulation and our reforms—focusing on what is most important for safety. We achieve safety, efficiency and speed not by rushing but by removing the unnecessary things that slow us down.

Second priority—leadership and operational excellence.

Our regulatory performance will not improve on its own. It improves when leadership is aligned on what excellence looks like.

That is why we established our LEAD framework—Leadership, Excellence, Accountability and Discipline. This new management model reinforces clear direction, high standards, ownership of results and systematic execution.

Operating under a management model is not about adding bureaucracy. It is about removing friction and focusing on excellent results.

Our goal is to embed the LEAD framework and leadership behaviors in our day-to-day work so they become enduring elements of how the NRC does business going forward.

And third priority—sustainable performance through a culture of continuous improvement.

Strong organizations do not stand still. They learn. They adjust. They invest in their people. They question themselves.

They ask: Why are we doing this? Why are we doing it this way? What can we learn from our experiences?

Continuous improvement is not criticism of the past. It is essential to fulfilling our mission. It is how we stay relevant. It is a commitment to getting better every day—it is the mindset that today will be better than yesterday and tomorrow will be better than today.

To strengthen our culture of continuous improvement, we are leveraging another important partnership we have with the Institute of Nuclear Power Operations (INPO)—an organization I know firsthand from my time there as a loaned executive from industry. INPO brings decades of experience and best practices that have helped the nuclear industry achieve high levels of operational safety and reliability. There is no need for NRC to reinvent the wheel when we can learn from the best practices of high-performing organizations.

American Leadership in Nuclear Energy is National Security

Let me bring this back to why all this matters—our national security.

Consider this: in the last 30 years, almost 60 reactors came online in China. In the United States—only three. That is not just a statistic—it is a strategic gap that America must close. Right now, many countries, including our allies, are choosing reactor technology partners. If America cannot deliver, those countries will buy foreign reactors and accept the geopolitical leverage they carry.

One more story. Our international team recently met with a country seeking to deploy nuclear. Their minister put it to us plainly—they want a power plant, not a PowerPoint. They will not buy a reactor that has not been licensed by the regulator and operating in the country supplying it.

This is why the NRC matters. America cannot lead if the NRC cannot deliver credible, predictable and timely safety decisions. NRC's reforms are not just about America's energy security. They are also about our national security.

Conclusion

Let me close.

This is an exciting time for nuclear safety regulation. I was at the NRC during the renaissance of the 2000s that never came to be. It is different this time. Back then, the mood around nuclear energy was still about preservation and survival. Now, the mood is about opportunity, optimism and partnership. What NRC is doing is different too. This time we are fundamentally changing how we make our decisions—working smarter, not harder.

This reform succeeds only if safety and security performance remains strong. As an enabling regulator, we are not lowering our expectations for high performance—from ourselves and from those we regulate. We are all in this moment together—as partners.

Thank you.