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House of Representatives

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Subcommittee on Economic Growth, Energy Policy, and Regulatory Affairs

“The New Atomic Age: Advancing America’s Energy Future”

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Thank you, Chairman Burlison, and thank you to the witnesses for being here this afternoon.

I am glad that we are discussing the potential of nuclear energy. With our climate in crisis due to fossil fuels’ greenhouse gases, we must get over our addiction to dirt energy. Nuclear can be part of that solution. According to one study, replacing fossil fuels with nuclear power has prevented almost 2 million deaths worldwide from air pollution as well as 64 gigatons of carbon dioxide emissions.

We are lucky that nuclear power has a relatively strong safety record in the United States. But this does not mean that it is inherently safe. It means that the rules and regulations that prevent a nuclear accident have helped keep us safe for more than 45 years. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, or NRC, is the independent agency responsible for protecting public health and safety by regulating nuclear reactors, and the safety requirements it sets are considered the global gold standard for a reason.

Before the United States became the world leader in nuclear safety regulations, loosely supervised government contractors exposed workers and the public to vast quantities of poorly stored radioactive waste at facilities across the country. Our government failed to protect our people and exposed communities to harm.

Take, for example, the families who lived and worked around the Hanford nuclear production facility in Washington state. In the era prior to effective regulation, farmworkers like [Maria Nicasio and her family](#) would drink from and bathe in a river contaminated by waste from the nearby reactors and plutonium processing facilities. They ate the crops those poisoned waters fed and worked for hours handling toxic soil and breathing in radioactive dust.

Maria’s mother died of cancer at 60. Tumors developed on both her brother’s and her son’s heads. As one government website [explains](#), Maria’s family “and thousands of other farm workers were likely victims of the effects of radiation from the Hanford Nuclear facility.” Today, the Hanford site faces the largest environmental cleanup in the country. We are still living with this legacy of government mismanagement and corporate callousness that has left taxpayers on the hook for [hundreds of billions of dollars](#) in environmental cleanup costs.

Look also at the 2011 Fukushima reactor disaster in Japan. The incident forced more than 150,000 people to evacuate their homes, and the ongoing decontamination efforts are projected to continue for decades and cost hundreds of billions of dollars. Regulatory capture of government agencies

by industry has been cited as a serious contributor to that disaster. As a new Member of Congress, I had the opportunity to travel to Fukushima to witness the destruction and hear about how Japan is integrating lessons learned as they forge ahead on a clean energy future.

The lessons of history are clear. The nuclear industry must be well-regulated. Only then can nuclear energy play a role in powering our economy, fighting climate change, and reducing deaths from fossil fuel pollution. Predictably, the Trump Administration is putting these possibilities in jeopardy by crippling the NRC and directing the agency to literally rubber stamp nuclear projects to get them done as fast as possible.

We should be asking whether the country, or even the nuclear power industry, really benefits from the Trump Administration's wholesale attack on the people and rules that make America's independent, nonpartisan nuclear safety regulators the envy of the world. The Trump Administration should ask itself whether it wants to be responsible for the next Fukushima or Hanford, when we can instead expand our nuclear power capacity without exposing Americans to more danger.

Instead of rubber-stamping new reactors, we should be looking at promoting modeling and simulation to strengthen licensing applications and safely streamlining the process for proven, standardized technologies.

I would hope that today's witnesses shed some light on smart next steps that don't involve burning to the ground the structures that keep us safe. I would suggest our next hearing on this topic include a witness from the Department of Energy's [Nuclear Energy Advanced Modeling and Simulation Program](#) and the [Oak Ridge National Lab](#) to talk about their work bringing technology to bear on how to safely accelerate the process of deploying advanced nuclear energy technologies.

If this hearing is about what the Trump Administration is doing to reduce "excessive regulations," then where are the witnesses from the NRC or the Department of Energy who oversee those regulations?

If this hearing is about advanced nuclear reactors, then where are the nuclear engineers who know how those designs interact with our existing regulations?

If this hearing is about rejecting the science behind globally accepted safety standards for radiation exposure, then where are the nuclear physicists or public health officials?

With due respect to the Republicans' witnesses, a career spent boosting fossil fuels can't take the place of experience and expertise in building or regulating nuclear reactors. And while I'm all in favor of shifting careers, neither does a background in immigration policy.

Instead of experts, entrepreneurs, or government officials, the majority has brought us two people who have never contributed to the science of radiation exposure, never tried to construct a nuclear reactor, and never had to make careful decisions about an industry whose accidents can last for centuries and cost hundreds of billions of dollars.

Maybe no one from the Trump Administration is here to defend its policies because they know that the things they've done to cripple the NRC are [indefensible](#). In the words of a former Commission Chairman, Trump's actions are "a guillotine to the nation's nuclear safety system." Maybe the reason Republicans couldn't find an expert to defend Trump forcing safety regulators to "rubber stamp" new nuclear reactors is because anyone can see that he is taking the country headlong into the next disaster.

We should be looking at how to keep our nuclear project approval process strong. And we should put the working people of this country above the greed that's now threatening to poison our nuclear power industry for decades to come.

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