

OPENING STATEMENT

The Honorable Andy Harris (R-MD), Chairman

Subcommittee on Energy & Environment

Joint Hearing with

Subcommittee on Investigations & Oversight

Review of the Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future Draft Recommendations

October 27, 2011

I want to thank our witnesses for being here this morning as the Subcommittees review the draft recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future.

Nuclear energy is an integral component of America's energy portfolio. One hundred and four currently operating commercial nuclear reactors deliver a clean, affordable, and reliable energy source that supplies 20 percent of America's electricity. That electricity generation, along with America's nuclear weapons programs produce radioactive waste that the Federal Government has a longstanding statutory responsibility to accept and permanently dispose of.

It is important to recognize how we arrived at this point. For more than 30 years, Yucca Mountain, Nevada has been extensively studied to determine if a permanent, geologic repository for high-level radioactive waste can safely be constructed and operated. Taxpayers spent approximately \$15 billion on this effort, and in 2008 the Department of Energy submitted an 8,600 page application to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission proposing that it could indeed be done safely. NRC scientific and technical staff reviewed this application in equally excruciating detail, and agreed with DOE.

Yet, despite this investment and decades of scientific work, the DOE has sought to withdraw its application on political, not technical grounds—asserting only that Yucca Mountain “isn't a workable option”—and the NRC Chairman has halted all work on the application review and refused to allow for finalization of the technical review. These actions come from political appointees of a President that entered office touting his commitment to “restore the basic principle that government decisions should be based on the best-available, scientifically valid evidence and not on the ideological predispositions of agency officials or political appointees.”

President Obama's unilateral decision to discard decades of the scientific community's hard work and ignore the current law on the books has thrown United States nuclear waste management policy into disarray.

This brings us to the Blue Ribbon Commission, established by President Obama in concurrence with his dismantling of existing nuclear waste management structure. The BRC is specifically tasked to review policies associated with managing the back end of the nuclear fuel cycle and related issues of storage, processing, and disposal of civilian and defense nuclear waste.

In July, the BRC issued its Draft Report to the Secretary of Energy and will release its final report by the end of January, 2012. I would like to recognize the good work the Members of the Commission put in to drafting this report. It contains valuable ideas that Congress should consider and work to be a thoughtful partner in advancing.

For example, I support the BRC's interest in long-term support for research, development, and demonstration on advanced reactor and fuel cycle technologies that could reduce the amount of high-level radioactive waste produced and change how that waste is managed.

The potential contributions of the BRC, however, appear to be limited by politics. Upon initiating the panel's work, Commission co-chair Lee Hamilton said that Secretary of Energy Chu "made it quite clear that nuclear waste storage at Yucca Mountain is not an option, and that the Blue Ribbon Commission will be looking at better alternatives."

The action by the Administration is striking not only in its audacity; it is also simply irrational to suggest a "better alternative" can be identified without a direct comparison to the current plan for which an alternative is being sought. To its credit, the Commission calls for expeditious development of a permanent geologic repository, but turning a blind eye to the elephant in the room that is Yucca Mountain will render its efforts fundamentally flawed.

Unless and until the Federal government honors its legal obligation to proceed with disposal of high-level radioactive waste, the long-term viability of nuclear energy to meet growing electricity demands remains in doubt. The Blue Ribbon Commission still has an opportunity to impact this future direction, and I hope today's hearing provides it with informative and useful guidance toward that end.

I welcome the witness's evaluation and recommendations on the Commission's draft report and I yield back the balance of my time.