

COMMITTEE ON
**SCIENCE, SPACE, AND
TECHNOLOGY**
CHAIRMAN LAMAR SMITH



For Immediate Release
July 29, 2015

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Statement of Energy Subcommittee Chairman Randy Weber (R-Texas)
A Review of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Licensing Process

Chairman Weber: Good morning and welcome to today's Energy Subcommittee hearing on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's licensing process as it relates to the Department of Energy's Nuclear R&D programs. Today, we will hear from the Honorable Stephen Burns, Chairman of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), regarding the extent to which the NRC and DOE may cooperate to enable vital nuclear energy research. Chairman Burns, we thank you for your attendance today.

Over the next 5 minutes or so, I want to give a quick overview of this Subcommittee's previous hearings that have led us to hold this hearing today.

Last December, we heard from a startup company and an environmental institution explaining that tech companies trying to develop the next generation of nuclear technology need greater regulatory certainty to raise capital in today's market. They suggested that the DOE should use its national labs as a forum to allow private developers to carry out this work.

In May, we heard from another tech company explaining that research infrastructure to provide versatile neutron irradiation capabilities is vital for universities and the next generation tech companies to research new materials and fuels. We also heard from the director of DOE's nuclear energy innovation HUB that the increased capabilities to model and simulate nuclear reactions will allow researchers to eliminate assumptions, which can speed up and lower the cost to develop new technologies across the board.

So what does this all mean? I'll keep it simple: we have the best engineers in the world that want to take on commercial risk and develop these next generation technologies if we just give them the opportunity.

These new technologies can:

- Mitigate proliferation risk
- Increase fuel utilization
- Reduce waste yields
- Achieve higher safety margins
- And reach high levels of thermal efficiency

The United States is at its best when we provide a clear path for our technology innovators to do what they do best – find creative solutions to the world's challenges. So now I'll explain what we intend to discuss today.

This Committee has often found bipartisan support for the nation's open-access user facilities that provide unique capabilities for both basic and applied R&D. This is a particularly good model because the users ultimately take on whatever form of commercial risk they so choose while the government simply provides the infrastructure capability. The prospective DOE user facility we're considering today would be a fast-reactor based neutron source. As a practical matter, the construction of such a facility will almost certainly require some form of technical assistance from the NRC and that will be an interesting topic to explore.

Another issue, and perhaps the most challenging question for the Subcommittee, is how the federal government can make the process simpler for entrepreneurs to conduct experiments that would enable them to translate theories for alternative reactor concepts to reality. The NRC has a regulatory process for non-power reactors, but the time required to issue a license appears to have created a barrier to investment. This raises several important questions relevant to our discussion today. Can the DOE use its authority to host private developers to conduct novel experiments advancing next generation nuclear technology, and could the NRC benefit in any way by allowing its staff to provide technical expertise and gain firsthand knowledge of such reactor experiments?

It is important that we work together to find solutions to these challenges. America must not lag behind our global competitors in this area of critical technology.

Again, I thank Chairman Burns for his testimony today, and I look forward to hearing from you on the NRC's role in advancing nuclear energy for our nation.

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