

Energy and the Environment Subcommittee
Opening Statement Chairman John Shimkus
NRC Staff Hearing on Yucca Mountain
June 24, 2011
(Remarks as Prepared for Delivery)

Today we continue the committee's efforts to understand the decision making process at the NRC in particular when it comes to the closure of Yucca Mountain. Specifically we will examine the views and perspective of the non-partisan NRC staff that was responsible for conducting the safety evaluation and technical reviews of the license application for the Yucca Mountain repository – and the controversial efforts to shut this review down.

This hearing will provide a public face on the professional people at NRC who have labored tirelessly, outside the public spotlight, in good faith, to carry out the Nuclear Waste Policy Act.

We will learn about the human effort that has gone into planning for and reviewing the Yucca Mountain license, an effort that represents first of its kind work. This is work to ensure a repository will meet the EPA standards for one million years. The NRC has worked for more than two decades to prepare for and to conduct the license evaluation.

This important job has required dedicated staff, representing a range of scientific disciplines to do the review with objectivity and integrity so the public can trust the work. There are geochemists, hydrologists, climatologists, various engineering disciplines, health physicists, volcanologists, and inspectors. The work NRC staff has put into the Yucca Mountain license application has been by all evidence world class, and we should expect no less from NRC. Now that very staff fears its work has been caught up in a dysfunctional agency which is threatening their ability to maintain public trust in the work they produce.

We will hear from some of the people who would ensure that, should NRC approve DOE's license application for Yucca Mountain, the repository will be safe. We should not forget how much money and human effort has gone into development of this project. To date we have spent \$15 billion, probably half a billion dollars alone by NRC. The American rate payer and taxpayer are owed something for this effort, yet that effort risks getting swept away by the political agenda of this Administration and the NRC chairman.

It is important for this Committee to gather information about what is behind the license review work, in terms of staff expertise, years of commitment, and integrity.

We want to learn the facts about the status of their work: is it complete, what else needs to be done, and what kind of direction they received from the Chairman and NRC management to shut down their work. Last week we took troubling testimony from the Inspector General about the Chairman's influence and actions to strategically work to impose his policy views on the Commission. Now we find this virus has infected even deeper than we imagined with manipulation by senior management of career staff's scientific findings.

These staff who worked on the program can explain exactly where they were in completing their work. They can explain what they were doing to carry out their responsibilities under the NWPA, and how the Chairman's and Commission's actions affected this activity. And they can explain what they believe it will take to resurrect the review of the Yucca Mountain application.

We can also get the facts about the current efforts to preserve the staff's decades of work on this project and whether those efforts will provide the public a full view of their analysis. There is new information we will examine today to determine whether staff continues to be restricted in providing a full and transparent report of their work to the public, which has been promised by the Chairman.

We want to understand how information flows from staff who seek policy guidance up to the Commission, how that has been handled when it comes to the Yucca Mountain license, and whether they believe staff is getting the support it needs from management, the Chairman and the Commission.

Let me also express my gratitude to the witnesses from the division level – Dr. Kotra, Dr. Stablein, Mr. Mohseni, and Mr. Kokajko, and their supervisor, Ms. Haney, for taking the time to appear today. It is unusual to hear directly from staff, but this Yucca Mountain matter is unusual, and your testimony is very important to our investigation.