



NRC NEWS

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NRC CHAIRMAN SAYS SUBSTANTIAL WORK AHEAD FOR COMMISSION IN THE COMING YEAR

Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chairman Gregory B. Jaczko said Tuesday the agency must “provide a steady hand” in managing existing programs and “also must keep our eyes fixed on the horizon” to deal with the challenges the agency is certain to face.

Speaking at the 22nd Annual Regulatory Information Conference in Rockville, Md., Jaczko took a look at “where we stand today as an agency and my vision for the NRC over the coming year ... using the lens of our key regulatory tools – rulemaking, licensing and oversight.”

“Our mission is comprehensive, but the way in which we meet our mandate is not static. For all the changes to our regulatory landscape over the last few years – the increased focus on security after 9/11, the safety changes after Davis Besse, the wave of license renewal and new reactor applications – our work likely will only become more varied and vital in the coming years,” said Jaczko,

“We must provide a steady hand – to continue doing what we’ve always done well, and to prepare for new and emerging challenges. And we also must keep our eyes fixed on the horizon – to appreciate where we are going, to recognize the issues that will take on added importance in the coming years, and to know what we need to do now in order to prepare for those challenges,” he added.

Jaczko praised Dr. Dale Klein, a commissioner and chairman of the NRC from 2006-2009, for his service to the NRC and nation. Klein will leave the commission upon the swearing in of a successor. Three new commission nominees are now before the full Senate. And he thanked Commissioner Kristine Svinicki for her work on, among other things, the cyber security rule.

Jaczko said he wanted to “address an ‘elephant in the room’ – the update to the Waste Confidence Rule.” It is important, he said, “that we stay focused on our regulatory responsibility – to ensure that spent fuel is safely and securely managed.” The NRC staff has told the commission that spent fuel in any reactor can be safely stored without environmental impact for 50 to 60 years beyond a reactor’s life of operation. Jaczko said he is looking forward to working

with his colleagues. “We need a rule that will stand the test of time... We should leave the ultimate strategy of disposal to organizations like the Blue Ribbon Commission whose job it is to examine the alternatives and make the recommendations on permanent disposal.

Looking at licensing reviews, Jaczko said that a necessary component for success “is for applicants to get designs completed as early as possible and to provide high quality information in their applications.” He noted the agency has a strong track record of conducting efficient, predictable licensing reviews while always staying focused on its public safety mission.

Jaczko also touched on the issues of sump clogging, a matter that has “been around for way too long with existing reactors, and has now even cropped up as a potential problem in certain new reactor designs.” And he mentioned reactor license amendment requests for adopting NFPA 805 – a risk-based method for calculating fire threats. This is an area, he said, “where we have had difficulty making clear, tangible progress.” He said the first amendment should be approved this year and once a pilot program is complete and the process has been proven, “I would encourage licensees not to wait to submit their amendment applications. I challenge all licensees to adopt NFPA 805,” he said.

“NFPA is the lighthouse to guide us forward in this area. We have grappled with this matter for 35 years since the Browns Ferry Fire... We need to continue pressing ahead on this issue. And for one simple reason that we have long recognized – fire poses a significant threat to plant safety,” he added.

The Chairman also said that however important good rules are, “what ultimately defines a regulator is its ability to ensure that its requirements are being followed. We stand watch, but the NRC can’t be everywhere and can’t inspect everything. That is why we must always maintain an effective oversight program. He said the Reactor Oversight Program has served the agency well, but the agency is looking at potential improvements.

Touching on the issue of buried piping and tritium leaks, Jaczko said that “we have seen ... the public concern that this issue can raise. The leaks to this point have been below regulatory limits and have been of low significance to public health and safety.” He said the agency is working with domestic and international standards organizations to see if more can be done.

“Just as our mission calls for us to clearly communicate to the public about the relatively low significance of these events,” he said about tritium leaks and buried piping, “it is also imperative that we clearly communicate to the licensees that we are not going to attempt to explain away performance that is less than stellar. Licensees have a responsibility to communicate for themselves and to make their own efforts to earn and keep the trust of the public in the communities where they are located.”

In a closing comment, Jaczko noted the agency’s participation in the President’s Open Government Directive. The NRC, he said, has a historic organizational commitment to openness and transparency.

“Consistent with that approach, I hope over the next few months the Commission will begin to meet more frequently in public to deliberate on matters under consideration. I believe that this kind of openness and transparency will build public confidence in the agency by highlighting our strengths: the hard work and dedication of the staff, and the diligence of the Commission,” he said.

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