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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927
Minority (202) 225-3641

Opening Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission on
America’s Nuclear Future”
Subcommittee on Environment and the Economy
February 1, 2012

In 1982, Congress passed the Nuclear Waste Policy Act. The Act sought to establish a fair and science-based process for selecting two repository sites for spent nuclear fuel and high level radioactive waste. Under this approach, no one state or locality would bear the entire burden of the nation’s nuclear waste. In the years that followed, the Department of Energy began evaluating a number of potential repository sites.

Then, in 1987, Congress made the decision to designate Yucca Mountain in Nevada as the sole site to be considered for a permanent geologic repository. There was no Plan B. As the Blue Ribbon Commission explained, this decision was poorly received. Ever since Congress decided to short-circuit the site selection process it established five years earlier, the state of Nevada and a majority of its citizens have opposed the Yucca Mountain project.

In 2002, President Bush recommended the Yucca Mountain site to Congress. Using the state veto procedures set forth in the Nuclear Waste Policy Act, Nevada then filed an official “notice of disapproval” of the site. Congress proceeded to override Nevada’s veto by enacting a resolution that was marked up in this Energy and Commerce Committee.

Twenty-five years after the 1987 amendments to the Nuclear Waste Policy Act, it is clear that this top-down, federally mandated approach has not worked. The Department of Energy has terminated its Yucca Mountain activities. Last year – and again this year – Congress has provided no funding for Yucca Mountain. Even the biggest advocates for Yucca Mountain in the Republican House have not acted to provide any funding.

In light of the poor track record of the current top-down approach, President Obama directed Secretary Chu to charter a Blue Ribbon Commission to perform a comprehensive review of U.S. policies for managing nuclear waste and to recommend a new strategy.

The Blue Ribbon Commission spent nearly two years conducting this review and its recommendations are timely.

The Commission recommendations deserve our serious consideration. They raise a number of important policy questions, such as whether a new organization should be established to address the nuclear waste problem, how the Nuclear Waste Fund should be used, and whether one or more centralized storage facilities should be developed in addition to one or more geologic repositories.

Answering these questions requires an open mind and a willingness to move past a narrow obsession with Yucca Mountain. It's time to move forward and today's hearing is a good first step.

I thank our witnesses for being here to share their views.