STATEMENT BY
SENATE REPUBLICAN LEADER
MITCH MCCONNELL BEFORE THE
HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND POWER
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I want to thank my friend, Chairman Whitfield, for the opportunity to testify before this subcommittee today on a subject that is not only important to Kentucky, but to the nation. It is my hope that the attention your committee is giving to the uranium enrichment issue will alert others to what he and I have been concerned about for some time – the urgent need to address our nation's nuclear energy infrastructure. Thank you again for your leadership on this issue.

Throughout my career as Senator from the Commonwealth of Kentucky, I have focused a great deal of attention on work conducted at the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant in Paducah, Kentucky. Located along the Ohio River in western Kentucky, for nearly 60 years the Paducah Plant has enriched uranium for use in America's defense and commercial nuclear reactors. Today, Paducah is home to the only domestic facility enriching uranium, making it a critical component of our nation's energy security.

The story of uranium enrichment in Paducah begins in 1950, when the site was selected for the construction of a new gaseous diffusion plant. For many years, uranium was enriched to support our national security and then to support our energy needs. However, after decades of work it was revealed that many of these employees were exposed to deadly toxins. The Department of Energy failed to put certain protections in place for these workers and it was up to Congress to set them right.

I wish I could say that the Department of Energy has been quick to recognize its shortcomings, and then move swiftly to correct them. The sad fact is they have not – regardless of which party controlled the Department. As a result, Chairman Whitfield and I have frequently been forced to step in and challenge the bureaucracy to live up to the law.

In the late 1990s, we learned about the dangers Paducah's workforce had been exposed to and we adopted a law to make sure that the workers were compensated for their injuries. Early last decade, DOE had to be forced - against its will - to implement an effective worker health screening program for workers at Paducah, Portsmouth, Ohio, and Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Time and time again, DOE shortchanged cleanup efforts at the site, requiring Congress to find resources elsewhere to make up for their shortcomings. When DOE dragged its feet in implementing a law to convert uranium waste at the site, I secured passage of legislation to require groundbreaking on a site by date certain. Even after passing two laws mandating action, DOE's efforts were still plagued with countless bureaucratic delays and disputes.

And four years ago, we asked the Department what its plans were for depleted uranium "tails" and here we are today again asking why the Department does not have a plan that includes Paducah.

I don't want to sound like a broken record, but you can see why Congress's patience has worn thin while waiting for the Department to step up to do the responsible thing when it comes to these enrichment facilities. At this point, the Department has forfeited the benefit of the doubt.

The Department of Energy is in possession of 40,000 cylinders in Paducah and 20,000 cylinders in Portsmouth containing roughly 700,000 metric tons of depleted uranium hexafluoride from

former enrichment operations. The substance – more commonly known as tails - sitting in these cylinders, exposed to the elements, poses a myriad of health, safety and environmental risks. Paducah has the capacity to convert this toxic substance into a more stable form for disposition and that will be necessary at some point.

However, it also has the capacity to re-enrich some of this material into marketable uranium, which could then be sold to benefit the taxpayers. I would ask those present here today to consider this scenario: you have materials right in your own backyard, you have facilities to turn it into a sought-after product worth at least $1 billion, maybe more, and a workforce trained and ready to do the work. Do you use that asset in a way that saves jobs, or do you let the Department slowly dispose of ALL of this valuable material and in the mean time 1,200 people collect unemployment? I know which option sounds like the common sense solution to me.

As the Chairman well knows, the unemployment rate in Kentucky is at 10 percent, slightly worse than the national unemployment rate of 9.1 percent. There are 1,200 jobs that would be immediately eliminated by the plant closure. But that's not all. Hundreds of additional jobs in the area would be cut by a shuttered Paducah Plant, potentially impacting the entire economy of western Kentucky. I would hate to see, in this current time of fiscal crisis and serious unemployment, a missed opportunity for the government to keep people employed and reduce the deficit at the same time. What is a better outcome than that?

I know these people. I've seen how hard they work. They are obviously concerned with their own employment, but they also want to help the country. Let's allow them to do that. At a time of fiscal crisis and double digit unemployment, a plan to re-enrich these tails helps employ

people and reduce our deficit. It's been a long time since I've heard anything out of Washington that makes as much sense as that.

Everyone knows that Kentucky is a coal state, which we are, but we are also a nuclear state. Paducah is a community that enthusiastically supports nuclear energy. Allowing the Paducah Plant to close in 2012 and waiting years for the Department of Energy address what to do with the existing depleted uranium, I believe, is short-sighted and irresponsible.

Let me be very clear, we are not asking for government intervention; we are asking that the government live up to its responsibilities to properly utilize inventory and facilities it already owns, in the best interest of the taxpayers.

I come here today not just as the Republican Leader of the United States Senate, but as a concerned American. When it comes to nuclear energy, we have seen this administration abandon plans and millions in taxpayer dollars before without much consideration of the consequences. Take for example its unwillingness to follow through on the nuclear storage site Yucca Mountain, paralyzing further nuclear energy production in this country. We cannot let the Department turn its back on these facilities, these workers, or these communities again.

That is why I am grateful to my friend, the Chairman, for crafting the "Energy and Revenue Enrichment Act," to give the Department of Energy the flexibility it needs to temporarily re-enrich tails at Paducah and Portsmouth. I am happy to be the champion of that bill in the Senate, along with my colleague Senator Paul, and it is my hope we can work with our counterparts in the House and Senate to find a fiscally responsible solution.

I again I thank the Chairman and this committee for their time.