Chairman Lamar Alexander Opening Statement
Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development

Hearing to Review the Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Request
for the National Nuclear Security Administration

March 16, 2016

(*As prepared for delivery*)

We're here today to review the president's fiscal year 2017 budget request for the National Nuclear Security Administration, a semi-autonomous agency within the Department of Energy that is responsible for managing our nuclear weapons stockpile, reducing global dangers posed by weapons of mass destruction, and providing the Navy with safe and effective nuclear power.

This is the Subcommittee's fourth hearing this year on the president's budget request, and I look forward to hearing our witnesses' testimony.

The National Nuclear Security Administration, or NNSA, has an important national security mission, but faces many challenges. That's why we need to do what we were sent here to do – to govern.

Like last year, we will have to make some hard decisions so we can continue to fund the most important priorities.

The president's fiscal year 2017 budget request for the NNSA is $12.9 billion, an increase of $357 million (or 2.9 percent) higher than the fiscal year 2016 enacted level.

Today, I'd like to focus my questions on four main areas:

1. Keeping critical projects on time and on budget;
2. Effectively maintaining our nuclear weapons stockpile;
3. Supporting our nuclear Navy; and
4. Maintaining our vital nuclear workforce.

Keeping Critical Projects on Time and on Budget

The NNSA is responsible for three of the largest construction projects in the federal government: the Uranium Processing Facility in Tennessee; the MOX Fuel Fabrication Facility in South Carolina; and the Plutonium Facility in New Mexico.

Combined, these projects could cost more than $20 billion dollars to build, and over the past four years, Senator Feinstein and I have worked hard to keep costs from skyrocketing. We want to make sure hard-earned taxpayer dollars are spent wisely and that these projects are on time and on budget.

Senator Feinstein and I have focused much of our oversight on the Uranium Processing Facility in Tennessee over the past five years.

We asked for a Red Team review of the project, which recommended ways to get it back on track.

We said the project had to be completed by 2025 with a cost no greater than $6.5 billion, and the design had to be at least 90 percent completed before we began construction of the nuclear facilities. We urged the Department to take aggressive steps to get costs under control.

The Uranium Processing Facility is off to a good start, but there's a lot more work to be done.

I'm going to ask you more today about the Uranium Processing Facility, particularly about your schedule for completing the design and when you anticipate construction can begin.

I'd also like to discuss the MOX Fuel Fabrication Facility in South Carolina. The NNSA has proposed that we stop construction of the MOX Fuel Fabrication Facility and recommended that Congress fund a different process, called Dilute and Disposal.

You have said that the Dilute and Disposal alternative will cost less, and get the material out of South Carolina much sooner than it would if we continue to fund MOX.

General Klotz, I am particularly interested in your plan for dealing with the 13 tons of plutonium currently in South Carolina, and ask that you address this in your opening statement.

Effectively Maintaining our Nuclear Weapons

Another major part of the NNSA's budget maintains our nuclear weapons stockpile, and I want to make sure we are spending taxpayer dollars effectively.

The budget request includes $1.3 billion to continue the four ongoing life extension programs, which fix or replace components in weapons systems to make sure they're safe and reliable.

This work must be done—but life extension programs are very expensive, so they need to be properly managed.

I will ask you today whether you will be able to meet your production deadlines on time and on budget.

Supporting our Nuclear Navy

Naval Reactors is responsible for all aspects of nuclear power for our submarines and aircraft carriers.

Naval Reactors has a lot on their plate right now—they are designing a new reactor core for the next class of submarines, refueling a prototype reactor, and building a new spent fuel processing facility.

In addition, Naval Reactors supports the day-to-day operations of 73 submarines and 10 aircraft carriers—including a total of 97 operating reactors.

The small nuclear reactors that Naval Reactors designs and oversees have had an impeccable safety record for more than 60 years; there has never been a reactor accident.

Maintaining our Vital Nuclear Workforce

While life extension programs provide the opportunity to maintain vital skills in many areas, they do not exercise all of the skills needed for a healthy weapons program.

When I had the opportunity to talk to Admiral Caldwell about the Naval Reactors program last week, he told me about his "technical base"—the men and women who respond when our nuclear ships at sea have a problem.

I'd like to hear more from the witnesses today about the challenges they face in maintaining the needed skills within their workforce, and what they are doing to make sure they have the right skills to meet their important missions.

With that, I would recognize Senator Feinstein to make her opening statement.

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