

July 7, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

As you know, there are currently two vacancies on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC). We are writing to urge you to appoint qualified individuals to the NRC who are independent of the regulated industry, who value public participation and involvement in decision-making, and who welcome debate and listen to dissenting and critical viewpoints.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has lost public confidence and trust. For far too long, the NRC has been dominated by the industry it is chartered to regulate. Too many Commissioners have seen their positions as temporary stints leading to a revolving door from the political arena to the nuclear industry.

The result is an agency in which dissent, critical examination and transparency are discouraged rather than welcomed. Public participation in crucial decisions that may affect millions of people is often greeted with a hostile attitude. Public intervenors in reactor or source materials licensing cases are routinely met with outright opposition from the NRC, rather than as legitimately concerned people who are exercising their civic right and responsibility to advocate safety and environmental protection in the licensing of nuclear facilities, and who offer valuable perspectives that may not have been addressed by the NRC. NRC Commissioners should encourage effective participation by citizen intervenors as an essential measure for ensuring the rigor of the licensing process, not a hindrance to be reflexively obstructed.

As our reactor fleet grows older, and thus requires more oversight, the NRC too often appears content to accept the status quo and bland utility assurances of safety. And the NRC has catered to the industry's demand for fast action on a raft of applications for new reactor licenses and designs by accelerating the licensing process in a manner that flouts the plain language and the intent of its own licensing regulations, undermines the effectiveness of the agency's safety and environmental review processes, and frustrates meaningful public participation in the decision-making process.

How the NRC handles the licensing of new nuclear reactors and other fundamental matters, such as radioactive waste disposal, in-situ leach uranium extraction, and the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel, will determine the safety and long-term environmental impact of our nuclear facilities and the soundness of our nation's nuclear policies for many years to come.

We believe it is essential that the open Commissioner positions are filled quickly. The NRC needs a full complement of Commissioners, especially new Commissioners, if it is to successfully handle the myriad of issues on its plate, and do so in a manner that may achieve public confidence.

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We would welcome the opportunity to meet with your staff to discuss these issues further and to recommend some individuals who meet the above requirements.

Sincerely,

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Hon. Steven Chu, Secretary, Department of Energy
Hon. Harry Reid, Senate Majority Leader
Hon. Barbara Boxer, Chair, Environment and Public Works