Statement of Commissioner Jeff Baran
Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works
December 1, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. It's great to be back with my colleagues to discuss NRC's important work.

I want to briefly focus on three pressing challenges affecting NRC: the fight against climate change, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the pursuit of environmental justice.

I see NRC's nexus to climate change in two main areas: the operating fleet and new reactors. For the long-term operation of existing nuclear power plants, NRC's role is to provide strong safety and security standards and rigorous independent oversight. The Reactor Oversight Process has generally been an effective safety framework. If we're going to make a particular change, there should be a solid safety case for it. Of course, NRC needs to be open to – and ready for – new technologies that could improve safety, such as digital instrumentation and accident tolerant fuels.

The other main climate-related role for NRC is the licensing and oversight of new reactors. New reactor designs have the potential to be safer than existing designs. The challenge is striking a reasonable balance between the value of new safety attributes and maintaining a prudent degree of defense-in-depth.

Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic has been another major priority for the agency. Resident inspectors are now back onsite and the regions have returned to in-person safety and security inspections. In fact, the staff has set a goal of getting back to normal levels of oversight this year.

During the pandemic, some inspections were performed remotely out of necessity. I see that as a temporary measure that made sense during an extremely unusual and challenging public health emergency. Going forward, there is broad agreement on the value of -- and need for -- in-person safety and security inspections. There's just no substitute for having independent NRC inspectors onsite.

NRC must also pursue environmental justice. The staff is performing a systematic review of the agency's programs, policies, and activities. They are consulting with a broad range of stakeholders and developing options for improving how the agency pursues environmental justice. In my view, we must meet the moment and not settle for doing things the way they have always been done.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.