

ENERGY

Republicans Want More Input on Revising Safety Rules at Nuclear Plants

BY MARGARET KRIZ HOBSON, CQ STAFF WRITER

Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chairman Gregory B. Jaczko and House Republicans are at odds over the pace of the agency's implementation of new safety procedures in response to the Japanese nuclear power accident in April.

In a speech Monday at the National Press Club, Jaczko called on the five-member commission to adopt a 90-day schedule for responding to an NRC task force's recommendations for improving safety at the nation's 104 nuclear plants.

Jaczko said the commission should "redefine adequate protection in light of what we learned in Fukushima."

"I believe we have enough information at this time to take the necessary interim steps on issues identified by the task force and initiate longer-term rulemakings that will allow for full and meaningful participation by the public," he said.

But House Energy and Commerce Chairman Fred Upton, R-Mich., and three of his panel's GOP subcommittee chairmen sent a letter arguing the NRC should slow down and gather input from other commission staff, industry experts and other stakeholders.

"Given the importance of the regulatory issues identified by the task force, we believe it is essential that the commission have the benefit of the full and deliberate process of review," the lawmakers wrote.

The task force that studied conditions at the nation's commercial nuclear power reactors after the accident at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi facility called for a sweeping overhaul of what it described as the NRC's "patchwork" of safety regulations.

The report said utilities should be required to adopt new procedures to increase safety at nuclear plants during prolonged electricity outages and multiple natural disasters and to protect the radioactive waste stored in nearby pools.

Meeting Scheduled for Tuesday

The dispute over the task force findings erupted on the eve of the full NRC meeting Tuesday to consider the report, which was requested days after an earthquake and tsunami hit Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power facility, damaging several reactors and causing an uncontrolled release of radioactivity.

The task force also was asked to produce

a more extensive six-month report.

The Republican letter was also signed by John Shimkus of Illinois, who chairs the Environment and the Economy Subcommittee; Oversight and Investigations Chairman Cliff Stearns of Florida; and Energy and Power Chairman Edward Whitfield of Kentucky. It echoed industry concerns that the task force did not have time to gather information from experts in the industry or from other NRC staff members.

Warning the commission not to circumvent public review of the task force's recommendations, the GOP members announced that they will conduct oversight hearings on the NRC actions.

But environmental groups weighing in on the task force report backed Jaczko's request for prompt action.

"Lessons learned from the Fukushima Daiichi accident warrant immediate regulatory responses and enforcement actions, particularly regarding the 31 U.S. reactors of similar design to those in Japan that underwent core melt and explosions," argued Christopher Paine, director of the Natural Resources Defense Council nuclear program. ♦

TECHNOLOGY & COMMUNICATIONS

Telecom Industry Hears From Rep. Bono Mack About Phone Hacking Scandal

BY KEITH PERINE, CQ STAFF WRITER

A House Energy and Commerce subcommittee chairwoman is questioning several communications trade associations about their members' practices in light of the burgeoning British phone hacking scandal.

On Monday, California Republican Mary Bono Mack, who heads the Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade Subcommittee, sent letters to five groups, including US Telecom and CTIA, the wireless industry trade organization, asking whether new laws or regulations are needed to safeguard against similar breaches in the United States.

Lawmakers across Capitol Hill are paying close attention to the growing scandal involving allegations that reporters for News International, the British newspaper subsidiary of News Corp., illegally hacked into the cell phone accounts of an untold

number of Britons.

Bono Mack has taken a go-slow approach on the question of whether Congress should enact a broad new commercial data privacy law. But she has moved quickly on the hacking scandal, contacting News Corp. directly, as well as AT&T Inc., Verizon Wireless, Apple Inc. and Google Inc.

U.S. Telecom Safeguards

"It's critically important to ask American industries involved in all parts of the communications stream of commerce — from device manufacturers to fixed wire and wireless providers — whether they are satisfied that sufficient safeguards are in place to prevent similar privacy breaches here in the United States," Bono Mack wrote in her letter.

She asked the groups what procedures their member companies have in place to guard against such activity and whether

consumers are adequately protected by "existing laws and regulations."

So far, the scandal is largely unfolding in the United Kingdom, but Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. confirmed last week during a visit to Australia that the Justice Department has begun investigating the matter in response to congressional requests.

Among those who urged the Justice Department to investigate were Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Chairman John D. Rockefeller IV, D-Va., Appropriations Chairman Daniel K. Inouye, D-Hawaii, and Environment and Public Works Chairwoman Barbara Boxer, D-Calif.

Telecom policy analysts say that at this point, News Corp.'s U.S. broadcast licenses are not likely to be at risk. But that could change if the drumbeat of blockbuster revelations continues. ♦

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