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Statement of Rep. Diana DeGette
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
"The U.S. Government Response to the Nuclear Power Plant Incident in Japan"
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
April 6, 2011

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding today's hearing.

Immediately following the earthquake and tsunami that set off a nuclear crisis in Japan, I joined Reps. Waxman, Rush, and Markey in calling for this Committee to hold hearings on the safety and preparedness of nuclear reactors in the United States. So I am pleased that we have the opportunity to explore these issues today.

On March 16, the Committee heard testimony from Chairman Jaczko of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission about how grave the situation in Japan was.

Unfortunately, here we are three weeks later and the status of the Fukushima reactors and spent fuel pools remains extremely serious. There continue to be significant releases of radioactive contaminants into the environment, including, in recent days, highly radioactive water finding its way into the Pacific Ocean. And every day we hear more and more reports of radiation in tap water, milk and the food supply.

It has become abundantly clear that it will be quite some time before we know the full scope of the catastrophe.

So now, here in the U.S., we turn our attention towards the dangers our nation faces should a similar severe disaster strike in the area of one of our 104 nuclear reactors.

As part of that effort, the NRC has prepared a report which uses modeling and simulations to analyze potential consequences of severe reactor accidents that, as of now, are considered highly unlikely to occur – just like the one in Japan was.

While I commend the NRC for taking the initiative to conduct this important analysis, the draft report raises grave questions about our nation's preparedness to address reactor accidents.

One of the two plants the NRC analyzes is the Peach Bottom GE Mark 1 boiling-water reactor near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, co-owned by Exelon and PSEG.

The Peach Bottom reactor has the same design as the Fukushima Daiichi reactors in Japan. In fact, in the United States, 35 boiling water reactors are operating, and 23 of these reactors were constructed with the same Mark 1 containment system as Fukushima. So this is a common reactor design in the U.S.

For the Peach Bottom boiling-water reactor, NRC modeled two key scenarios involving the loss of power at the plant. Both of these scenarios reflect the effects of an extreme external event, such as an earthquake, flood, or fire.

For each of the two scenarios, NRC looked at what would happen if the plant had the latest equipment and procedures introduced since the September 11 attacks. They also looked at what would happen if the plant didn't have the new equipment and procedures.

Under the more severe loss-of-power scenario, the site loses all power - even the back-up batteries.

In their severe loss-of-power scenario, the Peach Bottom reactor came dangerously close to core damage. With all its power lost, the operator was able to prevent core damage for two days; but after only two days, the modeling showed that the Peach Bottom reactor came within one hour of core damage.

In other words, when a major earthquake, flood, or fire was assumed to knock out all of the power of a nuclear reactor…

that is the same design as Fukushima…

and stands less than 40 miles from the city of Baltimore – well within the contamination zone the US called for in Japan

…that plant came <u>less than an hour away from partial nuclear meltdown</u>.

A frightening scenario for the American people – to be sure.

And while these draft findings are already very troubling, they do not even take into account the issue of the spent fuel pools, which have been a major source of radiation and radioactive contamination in Japan.

So as alarming as this report's findings are, it is sadly clear that we still have much to evaluate before we can know the true threats to our nation from a disaster like what we've seen in Japan.

Mr. Chairman, the American people have questions. And we in Congress have questions. But the first question I cannot help but ask is "Why do we keep finding ourselves here?"

It seems time and time again, we hear "Don't worry. It's safe." And "Oh but that would never happen."

Yet here we are again – gathered at a hearing to address the very real and devastating consequences of something that supposedly would "never happen."

Less than a year ago, many of us sat together at hearing after hearing investigating the terrible crisis of the Deepwater Horizon spill. And what did we all learn then?

That all those things they said could never happen - did. And then disturbingly we learned an entire industry was quite simply unprepared for the failure of numerous failsafe methods.

Yet here we are again – "Trust us, it's safe" has now given way to the reality that all the failsafes, failed.

We are – so far – lucky that we have not faced the crisis Japan is now coping with. So we are also lucky to now have this opportunity here to better prepare for what actually could happen at one of our nuclear reactors.

The truth is, as we cope with another crisis that might have been prevented with better preparation and oversight, and do what we can to prevent a similar disaster here in the US…

This seems like an ideal time to remind many of my colleagues across the aisle that "regulation" is not a bad word.

Regulation is a good and appropriate role for government – To protect the American people - the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the food we eat.

As a representative of Colorado I am an unwavering supporter of sound, smart energy policy.

But as we find ourselves here once again, it should be clear to all of us in Congress, that as we look at our energy portfolio we must take every possible step to ensure all energy production is done as safely as possible…

And that any time we are tempted to say, "but that will never happen," we actually take steps that assume, indeed, it will.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.