NAVIGATING NUCLEAR: HIGHLIGHTS FROM NRC'S 2026 REGULATORY INFORMATION CONFERENCE

Date: 31 March 2026

US Energy, Infrastructure, and Resources Alert

By: Tison A. Campbell, Ellery R. Richardson, Michael S. Heard Snow, Jasper G. Noble

Against the backdrop of an ongoing wholesale regulatory overhaul, the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) held its 38th annual Regulatory Information Conference (RIC) earlier this month.[1] The NRC chairman and commissioners, high-ranking US and international government appointees and officials, and other experts were in attendance to discuss cross-cutting issues facing the industry.

In this edition of our “Navigating Nuclear” series, we summarize important takeaways and themes from this year's RIC and look ahead to what will be a transformative year for the nuclear industry.

SHOVELS IN THE GROUND...

Over the past year, the makeup of the Commission has changed dramatically. Recently restored to full staffing with the confirmation of Chairman Ho Nieh and Commissioner Douglas Weaver, this year's RIC provided the first opportunity for the five Commissioners to react to the changing landscape of the past 12 months and set the tone for the wholesale revision of the agency's regulations directed by Executive Order 14300, “Ordering the Reform of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.”

Chairman Nieh addressed these issues head-on in his plenary session where he reinforced the NRC's commitment to safety and highlighted the NRC's ongoing role as an independent regulator. At the same time, the Chairman noted that independence does not mean isolation—the NRC must engage with other federal agencies to ensure government-wide support for nuclear technology. He also noted that the NRC is focused on enabling the safe use of nuclear technology and ensuring stronger leadership alignment. Laying out his priorities for the agency, the Chairman focused on delivering the NRC's core mission “with safety, efficiency, and speed”; ensuring leadership and operational excellence; and providing for “sustainable performance through continuous improvement.” In particular, the Chairman committed to using lessons learned from his time in the private sector to drive continuous improvement at the agency—starting with the implementation of the principles of Institute of Nuclear Power Operations 19-003, which describes how to establish and maintain an organizational culture focused on continuous improvement.

Building on the theme of enabling the safe use of nuclear technology, the Chairman defined success for the agency as “shovels in the ground…”—meaning the start of construction for NRC-licensed projects.

Although each commissioner had a slightly different focus, all noted the importance of the current moment: Commissioner Wright reflected on his year as chairman and the challenge of implementing Executive Order 14300 and the Accelerating Deployment of Versatile, Advanced Nuclear for Clean Energy (ADVANCE) Act. He talked about how the NRC evolved to become a more modern regulator without abandoning the agency's key

©2005-2026 K&L Gates LLP. All Rights Reserved.

safety mission. Commissioner Crowell, like the Chairman, highlighted that NRC independence does not mean isolation, and he identified two keys to "getting it right": no "foot faults" on the part of the NRC, existing industry, or new applicants; and building and maintaining a "world class" nuclear workforce. Commissioner Marzano looked back to the early years of the Atomic Energy Commission and cited to Admiral Rickover's well-known "paper reactor" memo to "underscore the difference between concept and execution." Commissioner Weaver, in his first RIC plenary, highlighted his overall regulatory philosophy that "regulation should be designed to efficiently achieve adequate protection," while noting that "what is needed to achieve adequate protection may change over time" and advances over the past 50 years mean that the NRC and the industry may be able to relax some of the large design margins, allowing for power uprates and more risk-informed licensing of advanced reactors.

THEMES AND TAKEAWAYS FROM RIC 2026

Throughout the conference, speakers focused on new developments and optimism in the industry, the many regulatory changes coming from the NRC, and technological advancements, achievements, and milestones.

Nuclear on the Rise

Although the NRC has yet to implement expected changes to further streamline and speed up its licensing process, the agency highlighted progress that has been made under the existing framework. In 2025, the NRC consistently moved faster than expected on decisions for both reactor and fuel-cycle license applications, including the TerraPower construction permit,[2] the NuScale US460 standard design,[3] the Palisades restart,[4] digital instrumentation and control for the Limerick nuclear power plant,[5] the TRISO-X fuel fabrication facility,[6] and the first-of-its-kind license to DISA Technologies, Inc. for a remediation technology for abandoned uranium mine waste.[7]

Regulatory Changes

Throughout the RIC, the NRC shared updates about the agency's ongoing work to implement the wholesale revision directed by Executive Order 14300. In particular, the NRC noted that it was working to implement changes to its reactor-licensing pathway to provide a new, streamlined option for microreactors (Part 57) and risk-informed advanced reactors (Part 53). Looking beyond the Executive Order 14300 rulemaking activities, the NRC highlighted the recent issuance of a proposed rule that would adopt a technology-neutral regulatory framework for fusion machines under the agency's byproduct-material authorities[8] rather than the more burdensome reactor licensing[9] regime.[10] This proposal was repeatedly cited as an effort to tailor regulation to actual risk profiles and is open for public comment until 27 May 2026.

LOOKING AHEAD: NUCLEAR OUTLOOK FOR 2026

Last year ended with the NRC returning to its full five-member complement, with Commissioner Weaver filling the fifth Commission spot in December. That trend continued into 2026, with the selection of key senior staff positions at the agency, including deputy executive directors and the office director for the Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation. With stable senior leadership now in place, the NRC is poised for a busy 2026 that will bring significant change to the agency's regulatory foundation. The NRC remains on track to begin 2027 ready to accept the first applications under these new regulations, which are scheduled to be finalized in late 2026. The

©2005-2026 K&L Gates LLP. All Rights Reserved.

firm's Nuclear Energy practice group will be continuously monitoring these developments throughout the year and are ready to assist in navigating this rapidly changing regulatory and policy landscape.

FOOTNOTES

[1] NRC's Annual Regulatory Information Conference | Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

[2] Kemmerer Power Station, Unit 1; Construction Permit and Record of Decision, 91 Fed. Reg. 12,628 (Mar. 16, 2026).

[3] NuScale Power, LLC; NuScale US460 Small Modular Reactor; Standard Design Approval, 90 Fed. Reg. 23,716 (June 4, 2025).

[4] MAUREEN CONLEY, NUCLEAR REGUL. COMM'N, NRC APPROVES MAJOR LICENSING ACTIONS REQUIRED FOR RESTART OF PALISADES NPP, https://www.nrc.gov/cdn/doc-collection-news/2025/25-046.pdf.

[5] *NRC OKs I&C upgrade for Limerick*, NUCLEAR NEWS (Jan. 8, 2026), NRC OKs I&C upgrade for Limerick -- ANS / Nuclear Newswire.

[6] TRISO-X, LLC; Special Nuclear Material License for the TRISO-X Fuel Fabrication Facility, 91 Fed. Reg. 12627 (Mar. 16, 2026).

[7] MATERIALS LICENSE TO DISA TECHNOLOGIES, INC. (Sep. 30, 2025), https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML2522/ML25226A191.pdf. *See also* DISA Technologies, Inc.; Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact, 90 Fed. Reg, 46663 (Sep. 29, 2025).

[8] 10 C.F.R. pt. 30.

[9] *Id.* pts. 50, 52.

[10] Regulatory Framework for Fusion Machines, 91 Fed. Reg. 9476 (Feb. 26, 2026).

©2005-2026 K&L Gates LLP. All Rights Reserved.

KEY CONTACTS



TISON A. CAMPBELL
PARTNER

WASHINGTON, DC
+1.202.778.9323
TISON.CAMPBELL@KLGATES.COM



ELLERY R. RICHARDSON
COUNSEL

NASHVILLE
+1.615.780.6717
ELLERY.RICHARDSON@KLGATES.COM



MICHAEL S. HEARD SNOW
ASSOCIATE

WASHINGTON, DC
+1.202.778.9318
MICHAEL.HEARDSNOW@KLGATES.COM



JASPER G. NOBLE
ASSOCIATE

WASHINGTON, DC
+1.202.778.9221
JASPER.NOBLE@KLGATES.COM

This publication/newsletter is for informational purposes and does not contain or convey legal advice. The information herein should not be used or relied upon in regard to any particular facts or circumstances without first consulting a lawyer. Any views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the law firm's clients.

©2005-2026 K&L Gates LLP. All Rights Reserved.