

Statement of Senator Bob Casey
Committee on Environment and Public Works
Subcommittee on Clean Air and Nuclear Safety
Hearing on Nuclear Regulatory Commission Oversight:
Security of Our Nation's Nuclear Plants
February 28, 2008

I want to thank the members of the Subcommittee for holding this morning's hearing. I also want to thank Chairman Carper and Ranking Member Voinovich for the opportunity to both testify and participate as a guest of the Subcommittee.

As a senator from a state with 9 commercial reactors and 10 million people living within 50 miles of those reactors, I can tell you that nuclear security is extremely important to Pennsylvanians. The recent incident involving a team of sleeping security guards at the Peach Bottom Atomic Power Station in York County, Pennsylvania has certainly raised the profile of nuclear security. The incident was inexcusable. But it has served to highlight some of the problems with the way security is implemented and overseen. I believe it is our duty to take the opportunity to learn from this mistake.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission recently reported a "white" finding for the incident at Peach Bottom based on their agency's color-coded threat analysis. This white finding means that the problem with the sleeping security team presented a low to moderate safety significance. But I think it is important to point out that for the 10 million Pennsylvanians living near nuclear plants, a low to moderate safety threat is still too great of a threat.

We need to be honest about the fact that good fortune is a big part of the fact that serious security issues did not occur at Peach Bottom while security guards who were on duty to provide rapid response were sleeping in the ready room. I am not willing to leave the safety and peace of mind of Pennsylvania families to luck, and I will not be satisfied until I can tell my constituents with confidence that what occurred at Peach Bottom will never happen again.

So what do we need to do to fix this serious problem at our nation's nuclear security plants?

First, we need to make sure that we fully understand what happened. Today's hearing is a good step in that direction. My staff, and in some cases I personally, have met with many of the witnesses who will testify today. I have also personally met with Mr. Kerry Beal, the whistleblower who alerted us to the sleeping guards in the first place. And I toured the Peach Bottom plant three days ago to get a better understanding of what happened and what Exelon has changed in their security operations. I know Senator Carper also visited Peach Bottom, and I thank him for taking the time to do so. It is not easy for a senator to clear a full day from his schedule for an event in his own home state. So we in Pennsylvania certainly appreciate his attention and commitment.

Second, we must restore the faith of the American families living near nuclear plants in our nation's nuclear security. Even though there was no imminent security threat at the Peach Bottom plant, the knowledge that the people in charge of guarding a potential target and securing the surrounding towns has caused local residents to question their safety. We have a lot of work ahead of us to rebuild the trust of the public in our ability to do our jobs and safeguard their communities.

Third, we must fix a system that allows a serious security problem to go undetected for months, even after the problem was brought to the attention of the NRC, the licensee, and the security contractor at Peach Bottom. I am pleased that the NRC, Exelon, and Wackenhut have all taken action to make sure that they correct the mis-steps that occurred at the Peach Bottom plant. But I want to make sure that these actions actually do the job.

Finally, we must rebuild the confidence of people in positions to report incidents at our nuclear power plants. They must know that if they make the often difficult decision to report a security or safety problem, they will be treated with respect and their concerns will be carefully investigated.

As an elected state official for the past decade, and the "CEO" of two Pennsylvania state agencies, one with 800 employees and the other with 500 employees, I know how difficult it is to manage people and budgets. But when an employee of a company or govt. agency starts to report a problem – personnel, security, whatever it is – there must be a procedure in place and the follow up to ensure that the problem is addressed. The leadership of that company or agency must ensure that every employee has the peace of mind to know that they can report confidentially and that action will be taken.

I look forward to hearing from all of the witness today, and I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this hearing and get answers to some of my questions.

Thank you.