

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

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31st ANNUAL REGULATORY INFORMATION CONFERENCE

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COMMISSIONER WRIGHT PLENARY

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WEDNESDAY,

MARCH 13, 2019

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ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

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The Regulatory Information Conference
convened at the Bethesda North Marriott Hotel &
Conference Center, 5701 Marinelli Road, at 9:15 a.m.

PRESENT:

DAVID A. WRIGHT, Commissioner, U.S. Nuclear
Regulatory Commission

RAYMOND FURSTENAU, Director, Office of Nuclear
Regulatory Research

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P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:15 a.m.)

MR. FURSTENAU: I have the pleasure to introduce our next speaker. He's our newest Commissioner.

The Honorable David Wright was sworn in as Commissioner on May 30th, 2018. And before joining the NRC, he served as an energy and water consultant and policy advisor on nuclear waste issues. He is the former president of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners and served as vice-chairman and chairman of the South Carolina Public Service Commission. He was also elected councilman and mayor in Irmo, South Carolina and to the South Carolina House of Representatives.

A colon cancer survivor, Commissioner Wright is an advocate for cancer awareness and education. He is a proud father and grandfather and has enjoyed umpiring baseball for 47 years. He is a graduate of Clemson University.

And Commissioner, I have to mention something about Clemson University. And I think my first encounter with an avid Clemson fan was on January 1st, 1982. Some of you weren't even born

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then but I think Commissioner Wright will probably know what happened.

I was in the Army and my best friend was a Clemson graduate. I was from a small town in Nebraska and I wasn't so much a football fan but he was and he kept egging me on about how Clemson was going to smash Nebraska in the Orange Bowl. And so I just couldn't bear it anymore so we bet on the Orange Bowl. And I think some of you, I think Commissioner Wright, you'll know what happened on that day. Clemson won its first national title by beating Nebraska.

And my punishment for that, and you probably won't view this as a punishment, Commissioner Wright, but my punishment for losing that bet was to wear this bright orange tee-shirt for a week with this white tiger paw on it. And I think you're probably just as avid of a Clemson fan as my friend was.

So with that, Commissioner Wright, thank you.

COMMISSIONER WRIGHT: I'm vertically challenged so I need to adjust this. Very good.

So good morning, everyone. Number 5 here, last but not least.

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Before I begin everything, I want to say congratulations to my fellow commissioners for their presentations and their speeches here yesterday and this morning. It was really good stuff and I hope that I can live up to the same standard that you have set yesterday and today. I'm really proud of you.

It's a pleasure to be here at my first RIC. What you saw and heard yesterday and what you're going to experience today and tomorrow, it's the final product of much hard work, many dedicated people, a significant show of flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving skills, a shared vision, and just a hint of a long tradition.

Thank you to everyone who has helped prepared for this event and for all of you for attending.

In order to fully understand the purpose of the RIC, its history and its traditions, I had to go back and read. I read a lot of previous speeches of the past and I've noticed that they often begin with thanks and I like that tradition. We don't thank people frequently enough in our lives, both personally and professionally. So I'm going to uphold that tradition this morning.

So I'd like to thank the wonderful people

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who make up my group, Team Wright, who have become like family to me as well. I've got Cathy Kanatas, who is here, she's my chief of staff; Kim Lora, who is my administrative assistant and my very first employee; Carol Lazar, my legal counsel; Samantha Crane, my materials technical assistant; Mo Shams, who is my reactor technical assistant; and Carmel Savoy, my other AA. And they make up the best office anywhere and they do a great job for me and for the agency, too, and I thank each of them for their advice, and their help, and their guidance.

I'd also like to thank Chris Cook and C. J. Fong, who have filled in as my reactor TA as needed. C. J. is going to be coming back here soon. And to a former office administrative assistant, Zarva Taru, as well.

I'd like to express my gratitude to the other commissioners and their staffs, who share the 17th floor -- or the 18th floor with me, and to the chairman and her staff on the 17th floor. You're excellent colleagues. You're welcoming, informative, educational, and challenging, and encouraging in a very good way.

I see the wisdom of the five-member Commission every day, the diversity of experience,

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the difference of opinions, the perspectives we bring to the table that just makes our decisions all the better and I'm appreciative for it.

And finally, a big thank you to each and every person that has briefed me since I was sworn in. I can't list you all because I only have 30 minutes but I want you to know that I do appreciate you taking time to prepare the briefing materials, answer my questions, and get me up to speed on the issues. Your help has been invaluable not just to me but to our team as well. So, thank you.

One of the things I noticed from reading past commissioners' speeches is apparently I'm supposed to tell a joke. It seems to be tradition, right? I do know a little bit about telling a joke. You see I'm the oldest of four kids, three boys and a girl, who grew up with a father who made part of his living as a standup comic. Dad was a comic of the Don Rickles variety, though. If that name doesn't ring a bell, suffice it to say that he's considered an insult comic. So let that sink in for just a second.

Anyway, my father played Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, the Hershey Hotel -- Hotel Hershey up in PA, among some

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other well-known places. Dad MC'd many beauty pageants and even more sports banquets and roasts, and he hosted several local television and shows of radio programs over his 60 years in radio and television.

Dad appeared in hundreds and hundreds of television commercials and he was a radio golf reporter for many PGA Tour Events, including the Master's Golf Tournament for 50 consecutive years, where he received the Master's Golf Tournament Lifetime Achievement Award. Can you tell I'm proud of my dad?

When we were growing up, which was a lot of fun in my house, Dad often referred to us kids in his routines, usually teasing us. He once said my sister Amy was so lazy that when she wanted to run away from home, she asked him to call a cab. Or about my Ricky he would say, my son Ricky, he watches so much television, when he woke up the other morning, the radio was on and he thought he had gone blind.

With us being so young, those jokes went over pretty big, too. I told my first joke on stage with Dad when I was maybe five or six years old. My father called me up on stage and told the audience that I was very smart, a real math whiz. Then he

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would ask me, he'd say, David, if you have two dollars in your right pants pocket and you have two dollars in your left pants pocket, what do you have? I'd say that's an easy one, Dad, I'd have somebody else's pants. So there's my joke.

(Laughter.)

COMMISSIONER WRIGHT: It's not a neutron walked into a bar kind of joke but it's a fond memory of my father and the value and joy of shared humor, along with a willingness to laugh at things in life, which I like to laugh at a lot.

And I'm going to go off script for one quick story, just to give you an example. I told you my dad was a broadcaster for 60 years. He had a radio show every morning from 5:30 to 10:00 with two other gentlemen. It was live talk radio and it could get downright hysterical at times. They were practical jokesters as well. And my dad, on the day of his 60th birthday, he was driving into town and the other partners had asked the local police department to stop my dad and they gave him a warning ticket for turning 60 in a 35.

(Laughter.)

COMMISSIONER WRIGHT: So during this RIC, you have the option of many technical sessions

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filled with experts from around the world, talking sometimes in a bit of a code, about high-level nuclear topics of interest. I've been at the NRC for less than a year and I do not bring with me a Ph.D. in physics or a long history as an inspector. So I'm not going to give you a technical address that perhaps some of my predecessors might have done or even current colleagues have done as well. Instead, what I want you to understand is who I am, how I think, how I expect to conduct myself, and make decisions that I believe have been and will be in the best interests of the NRC and its stakeholders, including both the public and the industry.

I've had an interesting, certainly unconventional path to the Commission. I'm a proud alum with Clemson University. That would be the college football champion Tigers, by the way, to all my Alabama friends. Maybe we can meet again in the playoffs next year for the fifth year. Until then, go Tigers. That's what I would say.

I graduated with a degree in political science, with a minor in communications, and some wonderful memories as a long-distance runner on the Clemson cross country team.

Since then, I have worked at an

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advertising agency, owned and operated a public relations and consulting business, been a press secretary, a radio salesman, run a local newspaper, owned and operated a Hickory Farms franchise, and was a national advance man for a presidential campaign. I have my real estate license and I'm a licensed auctioneer in South Carolina. And I've also, as you heard, umpired baseball for 47 years. More about baseball in a bit.

Despite all those various and diverse jobs, and they were a lot of fun, the most important one in terms of my road to the NRC where things really started for me was as mayor of a small town. The NRC's historian, Tom Wellock, did a bit of researching on my behalf and he's fairly certain that I'm the only elected official to sit on the Commission. We've had an astronaut, lawyers, academics, military commanders but I'm apparently the first mayor. I'm pretty sure I'm the first former state utility commissioner as well to serve on the Commission.

And I can tell you this: I've relied on what I learned leading a small town every day that I've been at the NRC as a commissioner. See, you have to learn the process, how things operate first,

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and you have to get to know the people that you're leading. Only then can you really figure out how to get things done, what's important to people, and what may need to change. You get wisdom through experiences. That's exactly how I've approached being a commissioner, too.

Let me tell you a little bit about my small town, Irmo, South Carolina. It's a neat little town about 10,000-15,000 people now straddling both the Lexington and Richland County line. It's near the shores of Lake Murray, about ten miles north of Columbia.

I was elected the Town Council at first, but because I felt some issues were not being addressed timely, if at all, the next time the filing period opened for mayor, I filed, ran, and then I won. I was all of 28 years old. I was the youngest mayor in the town's history and, at the time, one of the youngest mayors I think in the country.

Sometimes youth is a blessing. That's because you just don't know how big a challenge something is going to be. So with youthful energy and enthusiasm, you just go for it. And so I did.

Representing a small town is no small job, though. Local politics are tough. You are

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never off duty. You run into your constituents everywhere, at church, at schools, at grocery stores, at the gas station, at the doctor's office, and on the ball field. You had to be a problem solver and a leader. You had to be compassionate and sometimes stubborn. You had to be a negotiator, a diplomat. You had to weigh priorities and never forget -- never forget the people who put you behind that desk.

You dealt with everything from garbage collection to zoning variance issues. And the decisions that I made had real and immediate impact on people's lives. On zoning matters, it could mean someone being able to keep their trailer on their land and having a roof over their head. You had to deal with the bizarre, too, like the aftermath of a young prize bull getting loose in town and being corralled in the Win Dixie parking lot by every Volkswagen Rabbit Irmo had on its police force. Yes, our police force was driving VW Rabbits when I was first elected. And no, VW Rabbits are not stronger than a bull.

After three years as mayor, there was an opportunity before me and I decided to run for the State House of Representatives. I didn't just run to run. I ran because it was an opportunity to do

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something for our area and for my state. The issue was the lack of State rules and regulations on storm water and watershed management. I felt like I could do some good from that position and, with hard work, I did.

But as in baseball, life can throw you some big nasty curveballs. You think everything is on track in your life, you're running on all cylinders. You feel good. You play basketball. You run. You play softball and golf, and your work is satisfying. Your family is happy. And then you go to a routine doctor's visit only to be told something that will forever change your life.

It was 8:15 in the morning on Friday, January 11, 2008. I still remember that morning like it was yesterday. It was just a follow-up visit to a routine colonoscopy, my first ever. The doctor comes in and, with not a lot of bedside manner, says Mr. Wright, I don't know what caused you to get a colonoscopy, but you have cancer. The word cancer, when spoken like that at you, takes on a whole different meaning. It's not an uncommon word, cancer. We hear it. We know it. But the word takes on a whole new meaning when it's addressed to you directly by your doctor.

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Your mind simultaneously goes blank and races ahead. Am I going to die? How am I going to tell my family? Will I be able to work? What will happen to my family? What comes next? How am I going to pay for this?

The doctor left me alone with my thoughts for a few minutes and in those few minutes the first thing I did was prayed. Then I got myself together and I made the decision to do whatever I could to beat it, not just for me but for my family.

So when he came back in, I was ready. I said what can I do today? It was clear to me right away that I needed a team. Fighting and beating cancer is not fun or easy and it's even harder as a solitary sport. I needed my general practitioner. I needed a surgeon, an oncologist, nurses, caregivers, friends, prayer. I needed to tell my family so they could help me, too.

Since I had not eaten that morning, which was a good thing for a number of reasons -- one, I had no food in my stomach to worry about keeping down after getting the news; and two, I was able to have a CAT scan that day. I had two surgeries and ended up having IV chemotherapy for six months for 54 hours straight every two weeks. On chemo days, I'd stop

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by the Burger King on the way in. Then I'd sit in the chemo chair for seven hours with the chemo right there, nausea medicines, and steroids, and fluids dripping into my veins. Then I'd go home with a bag of the chemo solution on my shoulder and I'd sleep with all night attached. I'd wake up, I'd go back the next day, and do the same thing all over again.

When I left each day, I went to work. I won't lie. I didn't feel great but I had work to do as a commissioner at the South Carolina Public Service Commission plus I had to be a dad. I was facing a trial, certainly, but I had my faith and I had my family. So I pushed ahead.

Fourteen hours sitting in a chemo chair every two weeks gives you plenty of time to think. I used to tell people I had to learn how to do 14 days of work in nine days, when you count the sick time that you're down after the chemo sets in. I pondered what interests me. What's my passion? What's going to be my purpose if I make it through this battle? I knew I would advocate for early cancer screening for sure, and I've done so, but what would I do for work?

At the time, I was a South Carolina Public Service Commissioner, a position I had been

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elected to four years earlier. Waste was a big issue in South Carolina, thanks to the four nuclear power sites and the approximately 3,800 metric tons of spent fuel waiting for a national solution for permanent disposal. And I decided sitting in that chair, the chemo chair, that I wanted to become an expert on nuclear waste and nuclear policy. So that's what I did.

While battling back a disease that could easily have taken my life, I read on my computer. I asked questions. I studied and I learned. I did become known as an expert on those issues during my time as a State Commissioner and working through the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners as well. I testified in many settings, achieved some visibility on behalf of the rate payers in my State and around the country.

Eventually, my name somehow floated to Washington and I was considered for a position as an NRC Commissioner. At my NRC confirmation hearing, I highlighted my local and state perspective on national nuclear issues. I don't think my role as a State Commissioner got extra attention, but certainly my testimony was informed by my experiences working for the people of my hometown and for South Carolina.

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I was pleased to be confirmed as a commissioner on May 24th, 2018, which is my late father's birthday, by the way. And soon after on May 30th of 2018, I put my hand on the bible held by my mother and swore to do this job in good faith and to the best of my ability.

So let me talk a little bit about what has happened since then. I figured out the computer system. I hired an excellent staff. I've made headway through the nonlinear feet of backlog paperwork and I've been walking the halls.

As I said at my confirmation hearing, I'm not a guy who stays in his office. So, I walk around. I've been to all three buildings in Headquarters, some of the floors more than once already. I plan to get to the Regions soon, too. I don't say commissioner in front of my name when I walk the floors to say hello. That's because it's not about me. It's about meeting the great people that make up this agency, seeing and meeting them in their work environment. I find it impactful to see, when you walk into their cubicle or their office, just what's important to them, to that person -- family, pets, sports, travel. What are they working on? What else do they love?

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Usually, once the initial shock wears off, they relax and share ideas, stories with me but not necessarily at first. Some are very surprised and taken aback and aren't sure what to make of a commissioner roaming around. And I get it. I get that I have a different leadership style and that people want to know that it's not a gimmick, that I am listening and paying attention, that I'm approachable, and that I care. It doesn't always happen the first time I meet them, but they loosen up the second or third time.

I'm happy to make that additional visit, too. It helps me know and trust the people of the NRC and for them to know and trust me. I've gained so much from my walk arounds and met some incredibly bright, dedicated, and talented people plus, I'm having fun with it.

I've also seen some things that I think can change. One of the things is the number of silos that I've seen. I see people working on similar items across the hall or building from each other. They don't necessarily know their colleague is doing the same thing or something similar. I have seen people that are right next to each other but who don't necessarily talk face-to-face at all. I think it's

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important that people get up and talk to each other. There is no need to recreate the wheel and there's no need to send an email if you can pop right next door and talk to them face-to-face. We all know that email can be misinterpreted. Face-to-face, there's fewer misunderstandings, you get the tone, the texture, and have the ability to ask questions right then and there, too.

On top of that, when people talk, relationships form, people feel heard and can share their ideas and solutions with others. People being seen and heard, that's important because people matter. And when I see people in the hallways, I want them to know they matter. They matter to me and they matter to this agency.

I feel that the people of the NRC are extraordinary in their dedication, in their talent, and their drive. And I'm telling you what, they're smart. Oh my gosh, they got degrees I can't even think about what they're about. That's not to say I won't differ with staff at times or question the way something is being done. Because I am trying to understand and learn, I can and I will ask pointed questions but I will be respectful in doing so because people matter and the work they do matters.

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I empower my staff and I want the staff of the NRC empowered to do their jobs to the best of their ability for the NRC and all its stakeholders. It's the same standard I hold myself to.

I'm a big believer in teams. Together, people can do remarkable things. My cancer team got me to remission. Not a day goes by that I don't think of them and I'm grateful. At the NRC, we're a team, too. Those at the top must model teamwork for that concept to permeate the layers, the floors, and the buildings of the NRC. Teams not silos achieve great things.

There's no limit to what you can achieve when you work together and you don't mind who gets the credit. I have a plaque at my desk that references that, and I look at it, and try to live by that motto every day, and I challenge you to do the same thing.

This position is not about me and it's not about the individual members of the staff. It's about the agency achieving its mission in the most efficient and effective way possible. And that idea brings me to my last point, which I'm going to tie baseball.

Yes, it's relevant. I promise.

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Baseball has been around since the 1800s. It's a team sport governed by rules that have stayed pretty consistent over the years. What's a fair or foul ball? What's a ball or a strike? These things, they remain constant.

There have been some rule changes made over the hundred year plus history that were necessary to maintain fairness between the offense and the defense and to protect the integrity of the game as a whole, like the infield fly rule. Other things have changed with the times, too. Games are now televised. Players chew gum and spit sunflower seeds instead of chewing tobacco. And pitchers have a whole arsenal of pitches now, not just a fast ball, but home plate is still the same.

The rules of baseball matter to the game of baseball and the consistency of those rules matter. Baseball provides instruction for life, too, and it happens right at home plate. As an umpire, I have a lot of affinity for home plate. Home plate is and always has been 17 inches wide. It doesn't matter if you're in major league baseball, minor league game, high school, travel ball, or organized little leagues, it's 17 inches wide, not more, not less.

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A pitcher has got to get the ball over the plate, over that 17 inches or he's not going to stay in the game; they're going to take him out. Umpires are not supposed to artificially make the plate 18, or 19, or 20 inches and say oh, that's okay, Johnny, you were close; we'll just give it to you. Doing that would hurt the batter because they're learning to hit and they're trying to learn what a strike looks like.

For young pitchers, particularly, getting the ball over the plate is challenging. Parents and coaches are yelling to widen the strike zone or widen the plate because games can get long. But you can't do it because if you give in, it won't stop there. They'll expect you to cut another corner later on something else.

So as an umpire, I teach. I don't widen the plate. Both pitchers and hitters, they need to learn the rules. They need to know what a strike looks like, what a ball looks like, and how an out is made.

Now umpires make mistakes, too, sometimes. Well, maybe. I had a fellow umpire tell me that he thought had made a mistake once but that he was wrong.

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(Laughter.)

COMMISSIONER WRIGHT: I'm glad you're still with me.

As an umpire, you've got to hold yourself to a higher standard of what you know to be right and fair. As an NRC Commissioner, I hold myself to that same high standard. I must be accountable to those I lead, and the agency must be accountable to those it serves.

The NRC's mission is reasonable assurance of adequate protection, not more, not less. We must meet our mission but we shouldn't widen the plate to regulate to absolute protection or to zero risk. We must make fair calls, interpret the rules fairly, change the rules and requirements when there is a compelling risk-informed reason to do so, and maintain the integrity of our mission to provide reasonable assurance of adequate protection.

I approach my job as commissioner much like I approach being an umpire. I call it like I see it. I follow the rules and I will not artificially widen the plate.

So if you've been following along with me this morning, and I thank you for doing so, you will know that who I am, and how I think, and how I make

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decisions as an NRC commissioner comes down to a few things: people matter, teams matter, rules matter.

My road to this podium started in a mayor's office of a very small town with an unexpected swing through a chair in a chemo center. I am proof that everything is possible, for us as people, for us as an organization, everything is possible. Things don't stay the same, and they won't stay the same, and they shouldn't stay the same. Change is inevitable. Curve balls are also inevitable. We should not be afraid to change.

As John Wooden said, failure is not fatal but failure to change might be. We should welcome change and look at it as an opportunity to apply our great knowledge and dedication to the mission to achieve great things. We have what it takes to do so.

What the NRC does is vitally important to this country. What the NRC does has an impact on virtually everything, the safety and security of our communities and of our country, an impact on our roads, our hospitals, on the economy, on the workplace, on the global nuclear community. We make a difference. We have impact.

We need that impact to be positive and a

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product of the people and teams who play by the rules, for the integrity of what we do as an agency depends on it.

One last thing before I close and take some questions from Ray. March is colon cancer awareness month. So I encourage you to schedule a screening colonoscopy or other screening test for breast or prostate cancer. Please take the time to do it because the life you save could be yours.

So thank you so much for your attention today and I'll be happy to take some questions.

MR. FURSTENAU: Thank you for your remarks, Commissioner Wright.

We have time for a couple of questions and we are getting questions as you were speaking. So I'm going to try to combine some things, since we are running a little short on time.

Towards the end of your remarks you mentioned about reasonable assurance, about adequate protection, and we shouldn't regulate to zero risk. How will you apply your approach to reasonable assurance of adequate protection to help enable the use of new technologies in the nuclear industry?

COMMISSIONER WRIGHT: Well so I was in a way you count it fortunate in some ways and

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disappointing in others but I did not have the opportunity to serve in the military. But I have had the opportunity to work with a bunch of the Navy people, and I've toured a lot of places, and I've learned about some of the culture that they live by. And one of those things that I have learned is their 80/20 thing. And I will kind of say this, too, if we all waited until we knew everything about raising a child, we'd have never had them. So if we waited until we got to that zero risk, it would not happen.

So the Navy has that thing about if they are 80 percent sure we can go on it, let's go, and then we can adjust some things if we need to. I mean that's a principle that I think is very important and I think we need to be open to that but put it in the context of what we do and what we're supposed to do in our mission. We need to be open to those change and to making sure that, one, we're not compromising our self but identifying that point where we can go forward. Digital I&C is one of those things that we've been doing for years, and years, and years, and years. That's like having that baby and not getting there.

MR. FURSTENAU: Okay, one last question. What's your greatest concern for the nuclear industry

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today?

COMMISSIONER WRIGHT: If they don't -- so I come from an economic regulator side, too. You know I have that background and I understand the business dynamics, too.

One, as an agency, if we do not do what we need to do to streamline things, to make things more efficient, more effective while maintaining the integrity of what we do and what our mission is, we could cost opportunities out there and cause things to happen that may one day end up we don't have anything to regulate.

So I think they've got to look at change and embrace the new technologies and opportunities that are out there, the industry does, and we need to be in partnership with them in making sure that we have the processes in place for licensing and whatever needs to happen so that they can get those things done in a timely manner.

I understand and I know that the taxpayer is our customer, our client, but anybody who is actually paying us fee for service for review or whatever, we owe them that same due diligence I believe and getting things done for them in a timely manner.

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MR. FURSTENAU: All right. Thank you, Commissioner Wright. Any closing remarks for this session?

COMMISSIONER WRIGHT: No. This is my first RIC and I had no idea of what to expect but it's a great bunch of people attending this conference. The staff has done an amazing job putting it together. The people who are here are very, they are very accommodating and they want to learn as much as they can. And you know you've got a crowd.

And I'm really thankful for the opportunity meet so many new people and look forward to developing relationships with you. So, thank you so much.

MR. FURSTENAU: Great. I'll make a pitch for Commissioner Wright. He's going to be chairing a technical session this afternoon, W20 on Independence without Isolation: International Perspectives. That's in Ballroom E from 1:30 to 3:00.

So with that, we'll end the session. The break is until 10:30 and I hope all of you can join us for the technical sessions that follow. Thank you.

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COMMISSIONER WRIGHT: Thank you.

(Whereupon, the above-entitled matter
went off the record at 9:49 a.m.)

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