The Secretary of Energy
Washington, DC 20585

February 11, 2011

The Honorable Lee Hamilton, Co-Chair
The Honorable Brent Scowcroft, Co-Chair
Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future
1000 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20585

Dear Co-Chairs Hamilton and Scowcroft:

The Obama Administration believes that nuclear energy has an important role to play as America moves to a clean energy future. One of my goals as Secretary of Energy is to help restart America's nuclear industry, creating thousands of new jobs and new export opportunities for the United States while producing the carbon free energy we need to power America's economy.

Last year, the Administration announced a loan guarantee for what will become the first new nuclear power plant to begin construction in three decades and, with the existing and additional loan guarantee authority requested by the Administration, we could see six to nine reactors built in the United States. The Department has also launched a new Energy Innovation Hub to use one of the world's fastest supercomputers to accelerate upgrades to our existing reactor fleet and speed the development of next generation nuclear reactors.

As part of the Administration's effort to restart the nuclear industry, we are strongly committed to meeting the Nation's obligation for the safe, secure long-term disposal of used nuclear fuel and nuclear waste. That is why we brought together a highly respected panel of experts to make recommendations about the best approaches to dealing with the challenges of the back end of the nuclear fuel cycle.

As you know, the Blue Ribbon Commission is not intended to be a siting commission; instead, the Commission is taking a broad and long overdue look at America's approach to dealing with the nuclear fuel cycle and making recommendations on a better path forward. In the meantime, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission recently affirmed that on-site, dry cask storage of used nuclear fuel is safe for at least 60 years after a nuclear plant has been retired.

Nuclear power plants run for decades – many have had life extensions of up to 60 years authorized – while some isotopes in the used nuclear fuel rods will remain radioactive for millennia. Therefore, any workable policy to address the final disposition of used fuel and nuclear waste must be based not only on sound scientific analysis of the relevant geologies and containment mechanisms, but also on achieving consensus, including the

communities directly affected. It has been clear for many years that Yucca Mountain did not enjoy that kind of consensus. To the contrary, the Yucca project produced years of continued acrimony, dispute, and uncertainty. This conflict may have been inevitable from the beginning, when Yucca Mountain was selected by Congress in legislation that was not embraced by the state and community selected to host the geologic repository.

The only way to open the path toward a successful nuclear future for the United States was to turn the page and look for a better solution – one that is not only scientifically sound but that also can achieve a greater level of public acceptance than would have been possible at Yucca Mountain. It is time to move beyond the 25 year old stalemate over Yucca Mountain – especially since technology has advanced significantly during that time, giving us better options both in terms of science and public acceptance.

In establishing its charter, I asked the Blue Ribbon Commission "to conduct a comprehensive review of policies for managing the back end of the nuclear fuel cycle, including all alternatives for the storage, processing, and disposal of civilian and defense used nuclear fuel, high-level waste, and materials derived from nuclear activities." It was an intentionally broad mandate, but one that specifically addressed the manner of making a decision of such consequence. For example, the charter asked the Commission to provide "options for decision-making processes for management and disposal that are flexible, adaptive, and responsive" as well as "options to ensure that decisions on management of used nuclear fuel and nuclear waste are open and transparent, with broad participation."

For these reasons, it is time for the Commission, the Congress, and the American people to move toward a better, more widely-supported, solution.

Sincerely,

Steven Chu