The Trump Administration is quietly dismantling safeguards for nuclear power and seeking to limit transparency and public input. Trump’s Department of Energy wants us to blindly trust them to protect the public. But blind trust in federal agencies is in scarce supply these days. Trying to sneak through regulatory changes may speed things up in the short run but is likely to cause delays later and magnify distrust of the industry. The Administration’s lack of transparency will come back to haunt the industry.

The story begins with an executive order telling the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to put more weight on expanding nuclear and less weight on safety. That’s clearly not the mission that Congress gave the Commission.

Then, the Department of Energy began secretly slashing safety requirements for nuclear power plants. Here’s the story from NPR:

> “The orders slash hundreds of pages of requirements for security at the reactors. They also loosen protections for groundwater and the environment and eliminate at least one key safety role. The new orders cut back on requirements for keeping records, and they raise the amount of radiation a worker can be exposed to before an official accident investigation is triggered.”
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> “Over 750 pages were cut from the earlier versions of the same orders, according to NPR’s analysis, leaving only about one-third of the number of pages in the original documents.”

Most recently, to further prevent disclosure and public discussion of safety risks, the Department of Energy has adopted a new categorical exclusion , which eliminates environmental impact statements, for what it calls “advanced nuclear reactors.” There was no advance notice of this change, and the agency is only offering an illusory opportunity to comment on the change after the fact. (Illusory because they’ve already made up their minds, like Lewis Carroll’s Red Queen imposing sentence first and holding the trial later). As the agency admitted, this is a stark departure from past practice.

An advanced reactor is any reactor the agency says is safe. This means that no environmental review will take place: no environmental impact statement, not even the more truncated report called an environmental assessment. Anyone seeking an exception will have to prove the existence of serious environmental impacts, in effect requiring the public rather than the government to do the environmental

assessment.

The commercial reactors in question will be built on public lands. As we learned with the Yucca Mountain nuclear repository, failing to build trust is likely to backfire in the long run even when the government is using its own land for a project. Moreover, all these rule changes are sure to be challenged in court, which will only add delays. And finally, there’s a good chance that a new Administration will require the plants to make expensive safety upgrades since no one will trust the current regulatory process.

Everything about the Trump Administration tells us that decisions relating to safety will be driven by political appointees, not agency experts, and that the political appointees will care only about pleasing Trump. The Administration is asking us to trust them, but these are the same people who told us that Renee Good and Alex Pretti were dangerous terrorists. And their boss thinks windmills cause cancer.

I’m open to the idea of considering nuclear as a possible zero carbon energy source. That has to be premised on serious attention to safety. Streamlining the process and updating regulations is one thing. Kicking safety to the curb is another. How can we take claims of safety seriously based solely on the say-so of political lackeys?