U.S. Government Accountability Office

Nuclear Power: Actions Needed to Improve NRC's Assessment of Its Workforce Needs

GAO-26-108737
Q&A Report to Congressional Committees
September 28, 2026

Accessible Version

Why This Matters

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) regulates commercial nuclear power reactors through activities such as certifying designs, issuing licenses and license renewals, and regulating the management of spent fuel. NRC's stated mission is to protect public health and safety and advance the nation's common defense and security by enabling the safe and secure use and deployment of civilian nuclear energy technologies and radioactive materials through efficient and reliable licensing, oversight, and regulation for the benefit of society and the environment.

In recent years, policymakers have shown an increased interest in strengthening U.S. nuclear energy capacity and maintaining the nation's position as the world's nuclear energy leader. In addition, NRC anticipates an increase in the number of applications for new nuclear reactor licenses. At the same time, concern has risen over critical workforce shortages at NRC, the pace of its licensing activities, and how to modernize its regulatory approach to meet the anticipated increase in license applications. The Accelerating Deployment of Versatile, Advanced Nuclear for Clean Energy Act of 2024 (ADVANCE Act), enacted in July 2024, gave NRC additional authorities to enhance its recruitment and retention of specialized staff.

The ADVANCE Act includes a provision for GAO to report to congressional committees on NRC's implementation of the act, including an evaluation of the extent to which NRC has used its new workforce authorities and an assessment of the authorities' effectiveness in helping NRC fulfill its mission (Pub. L. No. 118-67, div. B, tit. V, § 502(b), 138 Stat. 1447, 1471 (2024)). This report describes workforce challenges identified by NRC and stakeholders (representatives from a nongeneralizable sample of 10 nuclear industry and nuclear policy organizations). It also examines NRC's plan to use the new workforce authorities granted by the ADVANCE Act and the extent to which NRC has used these authorities.

Key Takeaways

- NRC has faced longstanding challenges with hiring and retaining adequate staff to carry out reactor licensing and oversight activities.
- The ADVANCE Act gave NRC additional workforce authorities in three core areas to support efforts to enhance its workforce: (1) direct hire for certain positions, (2) compensation flexibility, and (3) bonuses for hiring and performance. From July 2024 through July 2026, NRC used the ADVANCE Act performance bonus authority to award 18 performance bonuses to current employees. It had not yet used the other authorities.
- In June 2026, NRC conducted an agency-wide reorganization in response to an executive order and planned to complete a comprehensive workforce inventory using a new strategic workforce planning tool. The results could clarify key staffing needs to best inform the use of the workforce authorities

going forward. However, as of July 2026, NRC had not finalized its strategic workforce planning tool and the completion date for doing so had been delayed several times.

- NRC officials identified retaining skilled staff as a main challenge NRC faces with its workforce. From July 2024 through June 2026, NRC lost, on net, about 500 staff—with nearly 740 separations and 270 hires. Voluntary retirements were the most common type of separation.
- As of July 2026, NRC had not established metrics to measure or assess if its workforce authorities adequately address its workforce needs.
- We recommend that NRC (1) finalize its strategic workforce planning tool by the first quarter of fiscal year 2027, as planned, to identify staffing needs and support effective use of the ADVANCE Act authorities to retain and hire staff and (2) establish metrics to measure and assess whether its existing workforce authorities adequately address its workforce needs.

What is the role of the NRC?

NRC is an independent federal agency responsible for regulating civilian use of nuclear materials in the United States for commercial, industrial, medical, and academic purposes. It is responsible for issuing licenses to commercial nuclear reactors and conducting oversight under such licenses to protect public health and safety while enabling the deployment of civilian nuclear energy technologies and radioactive materials.

NRC reviews applications for new licenses, renews licenses for existing licensees, and conducts inspections. Figure 1 illustrates some activities that NRC authorizes licensees to conduct.

Figure 1: Activities NRC May Authorize for Applicants to Conduct Through the Licensing Process

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) information. | GAO-26-108737

Accessible Data for Figure 1: Activities NRC May Authorize for Applicants to Conduct Through the Licensing Process

1) Construct, operate, and decommission commercial reactors and fuel cycle facilities.
2) Possess, use, process, export, and import nuclear materials and waste and handle certain aspects of their transportation.
3) Site, design, construct, operate, and close waste disposal facilities.

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) information. | GAO-26-108737

What workforce authorities did the ADVANCE Act grant NRC?

The ADVANCE Act gave NRC additional authorities to hire staff to carry out licensing and oversight activities, address insufficient base compensation of staff, and provide bonuses.[1] These authorities generally apply to covered positions—positions that require certain highly specialized expertise or skills to address critical licensing or oversight needs or that NRC leadership determines to be necessary to fulfill NRC responsibilities in a timely, efficient, and effective manner. The authorities to directly hire staff and address insufficient

compensation will sunset at the end of fiscal year 2034 unless NRC certifies that these authorities are necessary to carry out its responsibilities and activities in a timely, efficient, and effective manner, in which case they can be extended to the end of fiscal year 2039.

The ADVANCE Act authorities offer NRC additional flexibilities to enhance its workforce in three distinct areas (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: ADVANCE Act Workforce Authorities Granted to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC)

Authority		What it allows
Direct hire	Temporary and permanent direct hire	NRC can directly hire exceptionally well-qualified individuals into both temporary and permanent covered positions without going through competitive hiring procedures. Temporary positions can be up to 4 years.
Compensation flexibility	Higher compensation	Subject to certain limitations, NRC may set the pay for employees, in covered positions, regardless of hire date, without regard to federal General Schedule pay limitations.
Bonuses for hiring and performance	Hiring bonuses	NRC can give a one-time bonus, not greater than $25,000, to employees directly appointed under the act's direct hire authority.
	Performance bonuses	NRC can give current staff bonuses, not greater than $25,000, for exceptional performance once every 5 fiscal years.

Source: GAO analysis of Accelerating Deployment of Versatile, Advanced Nuclear for Clean Energy Act of 2024 (ADVANCE Act), Pub. L. No. 118-67, div. B, tit. V, § 502, 138 Stat. 1447, 1448 (codified at 42 U.S.C. § 2201b). | GAO-26-108737

Accessible Data for Figure 2: ADVANCE Act Workforce Authorities Granted to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC)

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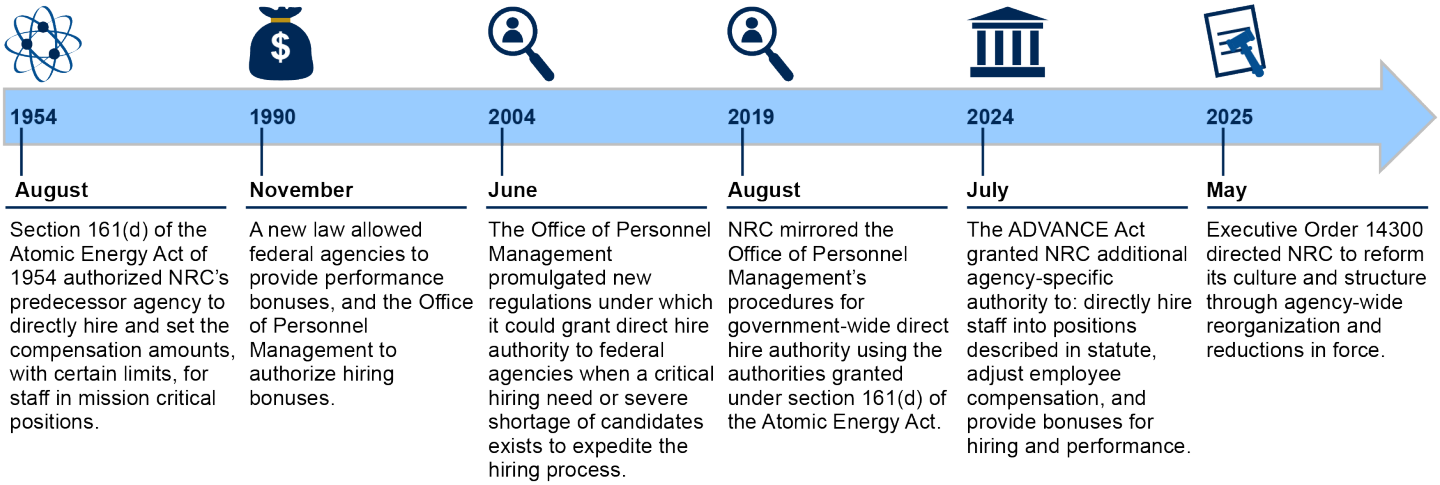
The authorities provided by the ADVANCE Act added to ones that NRC already possessed and that are still in effect. For example, under the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, NRC has the authority to hire employees outside of the competitive civil service hiring process as deemed necessary.[2] The extent to which the ADVANCE Act authorities expand on NRC's existing authorities will depend on NRC's implementation of these new authorities.[3]

NRC officials and most stakeholders we interviewed stated that they expect that the ADVANCE Act can be a useful tool to help retain critically skilled staff and recruit entry-level staff. Further, NRC officials and nearly all stakeholders we interviewed said they anticipated that the additional ADVANCE Act workforce authorities could support NRC's workforce needs. While NRC had preexisting authority to directly hire staff and adjust compensation, the ADVANCE Act focuses the agency's new hiring authority by defining the types of positions that are covered, according to NRC officials. In addition, officials stated that the ADVANCE Act granted NRC an agency-specific authority to provide performance bonuses to staff—an authority it did not previously have.[4] The ADVANCE Act also granted NRC an agency-specific authority to provide recruitment bonuses that it did not previously have.[5]

The workforce authorities in the ADVANCE Act build on NRC's existing mandates, authorities, flexibilities, and tools related to staff recruitment and

retention. Other mechanisms have affected NRC's workforce capabilities over time (see fig. 3).

Figure 3: Timeline of Key U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) Workforce Mandates, Authorities, Flexibilities, and Tools



Source: GAO analysis of federal laws, guidance, and executive orders. | GAO-26-108737

Accessible Data for Figure 3: Timeline of Key U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) Workforce Mandates, Authorities, Flexibilities, and Tools

- 1954 - August
  - Section 161(d) of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954 authorized NRC's predecessor agency to directly hire and set the compensation amounts, with certain limits, for staff in mission critical positions.
- 1990 – November
  - Allowed federal agencies to provide performance bonuses, and the Office of Personnel Management to authorize hiring bonuses.
- 2004 – June
  - Allowed the Office of Personnel Management to grant direct hire authority to federal agencies when a critical hiring need or severe shortage of candidates exists to expedite the hiring process.
- 2019 – August
  - NRC mirrored the Office of Personnel Management's procedures for government-wide direct hire authority using the authorities granted under section 161(d) of the Atomic Energy Act.
- 2024 - July
  - The ADVANCE Act granted NRC additional agency-specific authority to: directly hire staff into positions described in statute, adjust employee compensation, and provide bonuses for hiring and performance.
- 2025 - May
  - Executive Order 14300 directed NRC to reform its culture and structure through agency-wide reorganization and reductions in force.

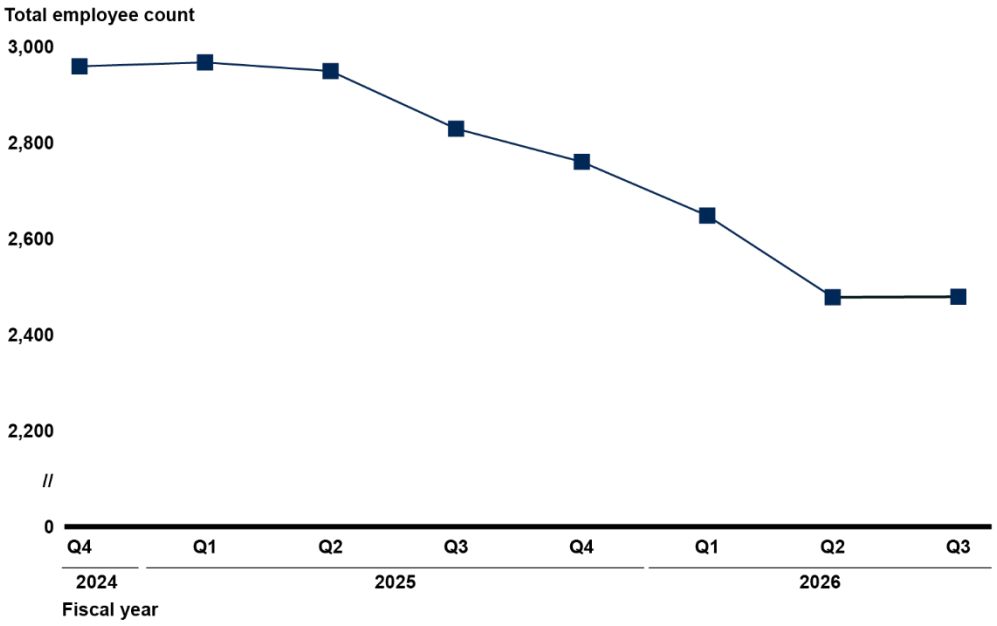
Source: GAO analysis of federal laws, guidance, and executive orders. | GAO-26-108737

Appendix I provides more detailed descriptions of the various mandates, authorities, flexibilities, and tools affecting NRC's workforce.

How has NRC's workforce level changed, and what challenges does NRC face?

According to all nuclear industry stakeholders we interviewed, NRC faces challenges maintaining an adequate workforce to support efficient and timely reactor licensing and oversight activities. Between July 2024 and June 2026, NRC experienced a considerable change in its workforce as the total number of employees declined by more than 16 percent, from 2,957 to 2,477 (see fig. 4).

Figure 4: Total Number of NRC Employees, July 2024–June 2026, as of End of Each Fiscal Year Quarter



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) workforce data. | GAO-26-108737

Accessible Data for Figure 4: Total Number of NRC Employees, July 2024–June 2026, as of End of Each Fiscal Year Quarter

- FY 2024 quarter 4: Total employee count: 2,959
- FY 2025 quarter 1: Total employee count: 2,967
- FY 2025 quarter 2: Total employee count: 2,949
- FY 2025 quarter 3: Total employee count: 2,829
- FY 2025 quarter 4: Total employee count: 2,760
- FY 2026 quarter 1: Total employee count: 2,648
- FY 2026 quarter 2: Total employee count: 2,478
- FY 2026 quarter 3: Total employee count: 2,479

GAO analysis of U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) workforce data. | GAO-26-108737

Note: The total number of NRC employees represents the number of employees as of the last complete pay period in the respective quarter of the fiscal year.

Beginning on January 20, 2025, the President, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) issued directives and guidance for federal agencies, including NRC, to reform their workforce. These directives and guidance initiated incentives for employees to voluntarily resign, terminations of employees in probationary or trial periods, reductions in force, and a hiring freeze on many federal positions.

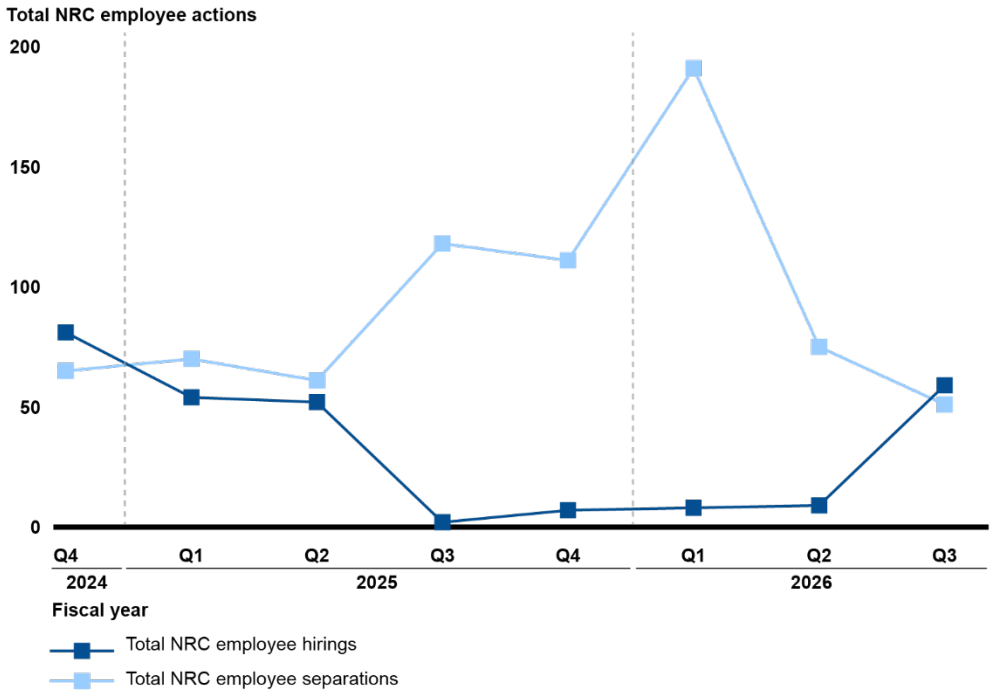
- On January 20, 2025, the Presidential Memorandum, *Hiring Freeze,* initiated a freeze on federal civilian hiring, ordering that no vacant federal civilian positions were to be filled and that no new positions were to be created.[6]
- On January 20, 2025, OPM issued guidance requiring agencies to provide OPM with reports identifying all probationary employees by January 24, 2025, and to promptly determine whether those employees should be retained. In a subsequent email communication, OPM directed agencies to separate any probationary employees that were not identified as mission critical no later than February 17, 2025. NRC terminated four probationary or trial employees.[7]
- OPM issued guidance on how agencies should reduce their workforce sizes, including through the Deferred Resignation Program (DRP), which was created on January 28, 2025. OPM established a government-wide DRP,

allowing full-time federal employees, with certain exceptions, who agreed to resign or retire by September 30, 2025, to retain all pay and benefits until their official separation date.[8] From January 2025 through December 2025, 112 staff left NRC through the DRP.

- In May 2025, the President issued Executive Order 14300 to reform the NRC. NRC was directed to take defined actions to reform its culture, structure, and regulations, including to carry out reductions in force. However, NRC officials told us that other employee separation actions helped meet the intent of the executive order's direction to carry out reductions in force. For example, 288 staff had voluntarily resigned or retired by the end of fiscal year 2025, some were terminated during the probationary period, and others took the DRP.[9]

Since July 2024, about 740 staff in various positions have left NRC through different mechanisms, including voluntary resignations or retirements and deferred resignations.[10] In that same time, NRC has hired about 270 staff in various positions. Figure 5 illustrates the total number of employees NRC has hired compared to those who left the agency from July 2024 through June 2026.

Figure 5: Total NRC Employee Hiring and Separation Actions, July 2024–June 2026, by Quarter



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) workforce data. | GAO-26-108737

Accessible Data for Figure 5: Total NRC Employee Hiring and Separation Actions, July 2024–June 2026, by Quarter

Fiscal Quarter	Number of Hires
FY2024 Q4	81
FY2025 Q1	54
FY2025 Q2	52
FY2025 Q3	2
FY2025 Q4	7
FY2026 Q1	8
FY2026 Q2	9
FY2026 Q3	59

Fiscal Quarter	Number of Separations
FY2024 Q4	65
FY2025 Q1	70
FY2025 Q2	61
FY2025 Q3	118
FY2025 Q4	111
FY2026 Q1	191
FY2026 Q2	75
FY2026 Q3	51

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) workforce data. | GAO-26-108737

Note: The hiring and separation actions represent all such actions that occurred from July 2024 through June 2026. Within this count, four employees had multiple separation actions.

While attrition rates increased in fiscal year 2025, NRC has historically faced challenges with retaining staff because of attrition rates and industry competition. For most of the stakeholders we interviewed, recent increases in these factors have increased their concerns about NRC's workforce stability. These longstanding challenges have significantly affected NRC's ability to recruit and retain critically skilled staff in recent years.

Attrition

NRC officials said that retaining critically skilled staff is a main challenge NRC faces with its workforce. NRC has experienced heightened attrition over the last couple of years, and officials expect its attrition rate to increase further by the end of fiscal year 2026.[11] According to NRC's Fiscal Year 2027 Congressional Budget Justification, in fiscal year 2025, the agency's overall attrition rate was more than 12 percent, an increase from about 7 percent in 2023 and 2024 (see table 1).[12]

Table 1: Workforce Attrition at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) Fiscal Years 2022–2025

Fiscal year	Attrition rate
2022	9.4%
2023	7.4%
2024	7.6%
2025	12.4%

Source: NRC Fiscal Year 2027 Congressional Budget Justification. | GAO-26-108737

According to NRC's Fiscal Year 2027 Congressional Budget Justification, NRC averaged around 138 retirements annually over the past 5 years, contributing significantly to overall attrition.

From July 2024 through June 2026, NRC staff left for various reasons, including separations under the DRP, termination of appointments, and voluntary retirements. Table 2 shows the separation types and number of employee separation actions at the agency over this time frame.

Table 2: Number of Employee Separation Actions at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), by Type, Fiscal Years (FY) 2024–2026

Separation type	FY 2024[a]	FY 2025	FY 2026[b]
Retirement (voluntary and involuntary)	17	173	119
Resignation (voluntary and death)	37	118	91
Removal (including termination of appointment, unspecified termination, and unknown)	11[c]	46[d]	18[e]
Deferred Resignation Program resignations and retirements[f]	0	23	89
Total	**65[g]**	**360[h]**	**317[i]**

Source: GAO analysis of NRC workforce data. | GAO-26-108737

Note: The separation actions in the table represent all employee separation actions that occurred from July 2024 through June 2026. Four employees had multiple separation actions during this time period.

[a]FY 2024 data represent the total separation actions that occurred in quarter 4. As a result, complete fiscal year 2024 information is not represented in this table.

[b]FY 2026 data represent the total number of employee separations through quarter 3, the latest available data at the time of our analysis.

[c]Of the 11 removals, two were terminations during the employee's probation or trial period.

[d]Of the 46 removals, two were terminations during the employee's probation or trial period.

[e]In fiscal year 2026, one employee had two distinct separation actions on the same day. We categorize these actions as "unknown" for the purposes of this report.

[f]Deferred resignation was available to full-time federal employees, with certain exceptions. OPM explained that electing employees would retain all pay and benefits, regardless of workload, until their effective resignation date, which could be no later than September 30, 2025. Electing employees would promptly have their duties reassigned or eliminated and be placed on administrative leave, except during necessary transition activities.

[g]Of the 65 NRC separations in fiscal year 2024, 29 were student interns.

[h]Of the 360 NRC separations in fiscal year 2025, 18 were student Co-Op Program members. Additionally, 66 were mission-critical positions. Mission-critical positions refer to positions NRC decided had to be maintained during a federal hiring freeze initiated in January 2025.

[i]Of the 317 NRC separations in fiscal year 2026, six were student Co-Op Program members. Additionally, 77 were mission-critical positions.

In fiscal year 2025, NRC's overall separation rate was nearly 13 percent. As of June 2026, NRC's overall separation rate for fiscal year 2026 was roughly 12 percent (see table 3).

Table 3: Workforce Separations at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), by Quarter, Fiscal Years 2024–2026

Fiscal year	Total separations	Separation rate[a]
2024		**2%**
Q4	65	2%
2025		**13%**
Q1	70	2%
Q2	61	2%
Q3	118	4%
Q4	111	4%
2026		**12%**
Q1	191	7%
Q2	75	3%
Q3	51	2%

Source: GAO analysis of NRC data. | GAO-26-108737

Notes: The separation actions in the table represent all employee separation actions from July 2024 through June 2026. Separations reflect the number of employees who retired or resigned, were terminated or removed from their positions, died, or separated under the government-wide deferred resignation program (DRP) announced on January 28, 2025. Deferred resignation was available to full-time federal employees, with certain exceptions. According to OPM, electing employees would retain all pay and benefits, regardless of workload, until their effective resignation date, which could be no later than September 30, 2025. Electing employees would promptly have their duties reassigned or eliminated and be placed on administrative leave, except during necessary transition activities.

[a]These values are rounded to the nearest whole percent. To determine the separation rate, for each quarter, we divided the total number of separations in the quarter by the average employee count for that quarter. To determine the total separation rate for each fiscal year, we divided the total number of separations in the fiscal year by the average employee count for that year. Total percentages may not match due to rounding.

According to NRC's Fiscal Year 2027 Congressional Budget Justification, NRC anticipates that its attrition rate will remain elevated due to industry competition.

Industry competition for skilled staff

According to NRC's workforce implementation plan, the ability to ensure effective mission delivery and performance in a rapidly evolving industry depends on NRC maintaining a high-quality workforce.[13] Industry groups frequently recruit and hire NRC employees who are highly skilled and have relevant technical expertise.[14] Officials from both NRC and the nuclear power industry have previously raised

concerns about the constrained labor pool of critically skilled individuals needed for key reactor licensing and oversight activities.[15]

Most stakeholders we interviewed said that in recent years, employees have left NRC to pursue careers in industry at higher rates than previously. Figure 6 illustrates the variety of reasons employees have left NRC to work in industry, according to these stakeholders.

Figure 6: Reasons Stakeholders Identified for Employees Leaving the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission

Source: GAO analysis of stakeholder information. | GAO-26-108737

Accessible Data for Figure 6: Reasons Stakeholders Identified for Employees Leaving the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission

- Flexibility
  - Better work-life flexibility
  - Telework options
- Compensation
  - Higher salaries
- Career growth
  - Greater promotion potential
- Nature of work
  - Opportunity to work on innovative projects
- Workplace climate
  - Low morale in federal jobs
  - Perceived instability in federal employment

Source: GAO analysis of stakeholder information. | GAO-26-108737

Despite these workforce challenges, most stakeholders and NRC officials told us they were not concerned about NRC's ability to ensure safety or the timely review of applications. However, half of the stakeholders said that timeliness of application review could be affected in the future, based on the anticipated increase in licensing demand from industry. NRC officials told us that they did not foresee future timeliness or safety effects because the agency routinely projects its future licensing workload based on companies' engagement with NRC's licensing pre-application activities and an annual industry summary.

Does NRC have adequate staff to meet its current and future workforce needs?

It is not yet known whether NRC has adequate staff to meet its current and future workforce needs because the agency is in the process of evaluating the effects of an agency-wide reorganization, streamlining its workforce functions, and conducting a comprehensive workforce inventory.

Agency-wide reorganization

In May 2025, as noted above, the President issued Executive Order 14300 to reform the NRC.[16] The order directed NRC to take defined actions to reform its culture, structure, and regulations.

In response to the executive order, NRC implemented an agency-wide reorganization in June 2026 intended to streamline decision-making, consolidate functions, and better align with licensing deployment and efficiency goals. According to officials, NRC plans to evaluate the effects of the reorganization to determine whether its workforce is sufficient for its needs. Specifically, officials said NRC plans to assess the effects of the reorganization on staff workloads and project completion rates to see if the new structure adequately supports mission needs. In addition, officials stated that NRC would monitor the effects of its new organizational structure on a quarterly basis through 2027 and make necessary revisions to the structure at any point if mission delivery is negatively affected.

Streamlining workforce functions

Executive Order 14300's directives to reform NRC's culture, structure, and regulations and reduce its workforce have affected NRC's expected workforce composition. According to NRC officials, the order has had the most significant effect on NRC's hiring practices, both in the near and long terms. For example:

Mission-critical positions. In response to a federal hiring freeze initiated in January 2025 and the executive order's directive to initiate reductions in force, NRC established a "carve-out" list of 70 mission-critical positions that the agency must maintain.[17] According to officials, these positions are critical to meet mission needs and obligations under the ADVANCE Act and executive order. NRC officials stated that identifying mission-critical positions exempted these positions from the previously discussed January 20, 2025, federal hiring freeze and changed NRC's approach to hiring new staff. Specifically, during the hiring freeze, NRC confirmed if positions were on the "carve-out" list before hiring externally to ensure well-qualified candidates fill mission-critical roles. Additionally, NRC accelerated its time frame to hire individuals in these positions from the previous 2027 target to 2026 in response to the executive order, according to officials.

- **Licensing efficiencies.** NRC officials and some of the stakeholders we interviewed told us that Executive Order 14300 enhanced the reactor licensing efficiency goals outlined in the ADVANCE Act.[18] For example, according to officials, NRC's new efficiency measures identified a potential reduction of about 300 full-time equivalent positions in the agency's current staffing plan, compared to NRC's fiscal year 2026 enacted budget. It is too soon to assess the effects of this change on licensing efficiencies.
- **Oversight and security changes.** According to NRC officials, changes made in response to Executive Order 14300 will change some agency oversight and security processes, such as the Reactor Oversight Process. For example, NRC is reducing annual security inspection hours by 50 percent, which officials stated was a risk-informed decision. At this time, it is too soon to assess the effects of the reduction in inspection hours. According to NRC officials, this type of streamlining may allow inspection staff to take on other duties within the agency, reducing the need for NRC to hire staff to fill vacant positions. Officials told us that the agency planned to shift staff from oversight functions to licensing functions in anticipation of increased licensing activities, noting that staff would be trained for their new job functions.

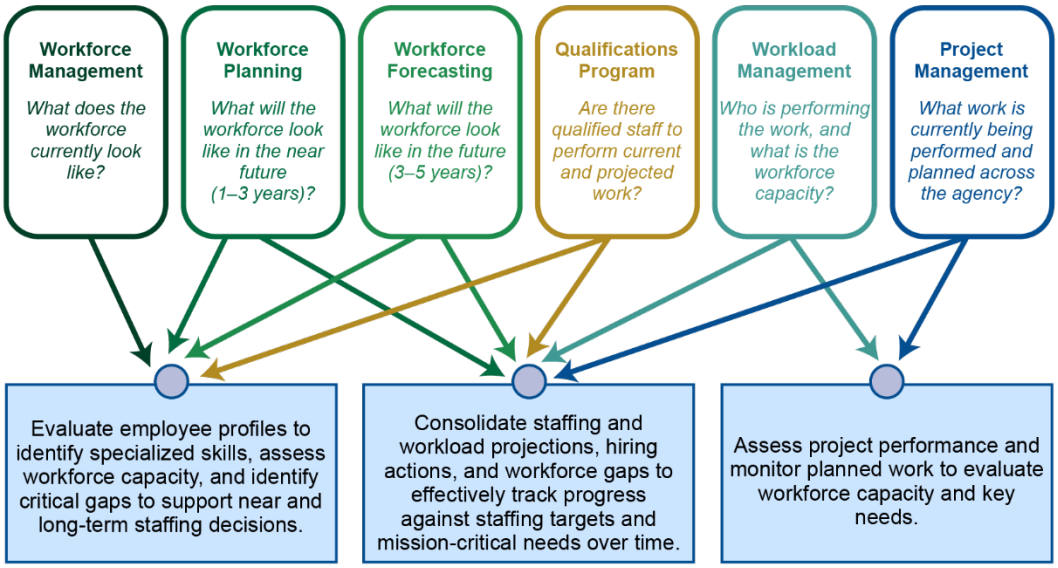
Workforce inventory

In 2025, NRC began developing a new strategic workforce planning tool—known as the NRC Enterprise eXecution and Utilization System (NEXUS)—to determine current workforce numbers, critical staffing gaps, and skill needs throughout the

agency. NEXUS is a critical tool that NRC expects will allow the agency to more effectively assess its workforce, optimize project delivery, and strategically target the use of its ADVANCE Act authorities going forward. According to officials, NRC may be able to more effectively use the ADVANCE Act authorities once the tool is finalized.

NRC plans to leverage NEXUS to support strategic workforce management and planning, project future needs, maintain employee qualifications, and monitor agency workloads and performance (see fig. 7).

Figure 7: NRC Enterprise eXecution and Utilization System (NEXUS) Components Intended to Inform NRC's Strategic Workforce Planning, Monitoring, and Agency Projections



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) information and documentation. | GAO-26-108737

Accessible Data for Figure 7: NRC Enterprise eXecution and Utilization System (NEXUS) Components Intended to Inform NRC's Strategic Workforce Planning, Monitoring, and Agency Projections

Workforce Management
What does the workforce currently look like?

Workforce Planning
What will the workforce look like in the near future (1-3 years)?

Workforce Forecasting
What will the workforce look like in the future (3-5 years)?

Qualifications Program
Are there qualified staff to perform current and projected work?

Workload Management
Who is performing the work, and what is the workforce capacity?

Project Management
What work is currently being performed and planned across the agency?

Bucket 1:
Evaluate employee profiles to identify specialized skills, assess workforce capacity, and identify critical gaps to support near and long-term staffing decisions.

Bucket 2:
Consolidate staffing and workload projections, hiring actions, and workforce gaps to effectively track progress against staffing targets and mission-critical needs over time.

Bucket 3:
Assess project performance and monitor planned work to evaluate workforce capacity and key needs.

GAO analysis of U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) information and documentation. | GAO-26-108737

As of July 2026, NRC had begun quality testing of five of the six NEXUS components but had not finalized all elements of the tool, according to officials. NRC originally planned to implement the tool in October 2025, but faced

development and testing delays due to the government shutdown in 2025. After the first delay, officials told us that they planned to launch the first phase of the tool by March 31, 2026, but ultimately failed to meet this target.

In addition, after the June 2026 reorganization, NEXUS responsibilities transitioned to a new office. With the transition, NRC must complete technical and operational reviews to fully understand NEXUS, and what it requires for successful operation, according to officials. Officials also stated that NRC must complete several key activities, including developing remaining functionality and conducting user acceptance testing, before NEXUS can be fully implemented. As of July 2026, officials expected NRC to finalize NEXUS's remaining workforce planning component by the first quarter of fiscal year 2027. However, officials stated that this target is contingent upon successful completion of remaining development actions, quality testing, and alignment with agency human capital system modernization efforts.[19]

Our prior work on strategic workforce human capital management identified activities that could help agencies strategically manage human capital.[20] These activities include conducting systematic assessments of current and future staff and skill set gaps and surpluses, effectively aligning staff with workload, and aligning the workforce with current and future agency needs.

Having a clear understanding of its workforce composition, current skill sets, and industry conditions can help NRC better plan its hiring efforts and project where challenges may arise. According to NRC officials, NRC needs to effectively monitor and evaluate its workforce to address current and future challenges.

By finalizing the NEXUS tool and using it to conduct a comprehensive workforce inventory, NRC can clarify the agency's current and future workforce needs to effectively carry out licensing and oversight activities. In addition, when fully implemented, the NEXUS tool could allow NRC to make informed decisions on the best ways to use the ADVANCE Act workforce authorities to improve its workforce going forward. Doing so by the planned fiscal year 2027 time frame can help position NRC to make such decisions.

To what extent has NRC used, and planned to use, the ADVANCE Act workforce authorities?

As of July 2026, NRC had used the ADVANCE Act performance bonus authority to award bonuses to some staff but had not used the other authorities.

From July 2024 through July 2026, NRC awarded performance bonuses to 18 employees in support of workforce retention. As previously discussed, the ADVANCE Act granted NRC agency-specific statutory authority to provide performance bonuses for the first time. According to officials, this authority to give performance bonuses was the most substantial addition to NRC's workforce retention authorities. The bonuses NRC awarded, totaling $335,000 and ranging from $15,000 to $25,000, were to employees who made outstanding contributions to projects related to the ADVANCE Act, according to NRC officials.

NRC had not yet used the ADVANCE Act workforce authorities for direct hire, compensation flexibility, or hiring bonuses as of July 2026. NRC officials cited various reasons for not using the authorities, including the agency's recent reorganization. However, NRC officials told us of their planned and ongoing efforts to facilitate use of the authorities going forward (see table 4).

Table 4: NRC Rationale for Not Having Used Certain Workforce Authorities from the Accelerating Deployment of Versatile, Advanced Nuclear for Clean Energy Act of 2024 (ADVANCE Act), and Planned Actions to Do So, as of July 2026

ADVANCE Act workforce authority	NRC's rationale for not having used the authority	Planned actions to facilitate use of the authority
Direct hire	NRC officials told us they had not used this authority because the agency recently completed a full reorganization, as directed by Executive Order 14300. According to NRC officials, NRC needs a more stable environment and a clear understanding of the new agency structure and workforce condition and distribution to understand where mission-critical needs may exist before conducting any external hiring. NRC has leveraged its preexisting direct hire authority to fill some vacancies over the years.[a] Officials told us that NRC prefers to use the preexisting direct hire authority because it is readily available across the agency for broad positions. Since the federal hiring freeze ended in October 2025, NRC has been actively focused on recruiting and hiring staff using its preexisting direct hire authority and related workforce tools and flexibilities, according to officials. NRC hired about 270 new staff from July 2024 through June 2026. According to officials, these hires were conducted using a variety of methods including public vacancy announcements and direct hire public notices on USAJobs.	NRC implemented its agency-wide reorganization, which took effect on June 15, 2026, according to officials. NRC officials stated that the agency was working to evaluate the effectiveness of the reorganization and any changes to mission delivery. NRC plans to conduct quarterly evaluations of the organizational structure and performance going forward and reassess the new office compositions and staff distributions. Such evaluations will support efforts to accurately identify workforce or skill gaps and determine if the new organizational structure needs further revision. NRC is in the process of preparing to conduct a comprehensive workforce inventory using a new strategic workforce planning tool—known as the NRC Enterprise eXecution and Utilization System (NEXUS)—to determine current workforce numbers, critical staffing gaps, and skill needs throughout the agency. NRC officials stated that they plan to consider using the ADVANCE Act direct hire authority if they determine that targeted skill sets are not present within NRC's existing workforce. According to NRC's January 2025 workforce implementation plan, NRC will leverage existing human capital frameworks to determine the most effective staffing methods.[b] In April 2026, NRC issued interim updates to its direct hire management directive broadening the language to include general guidance for requirements, processes, and roles and responsibilities to use its direct hire authority.[c] According to NRC documentation, these broad revisions are intended to enhance the hiring processes' overall efficiency and effectiveness. Officials told us that NRC plans to consider explicitly citing the ADVANCE Act as an additional agency appointment authority in the formal updates to its management directives in the next agency revision cycle in fiscal years 2029 through 2031.
Compensation flexibility	NRC officials told us that while the agency has actively considered appropriate use cases, it has struggled to identify a method to effectively and fairly use this authority. According to officials, it would be hard to justify using the compensation flexibility authority for individuals without applying any salary adjustments to all staff within the same job series. Because each position is occupied by large numbers of staff, raising all such salaries would likely require NRC to increase licensing activity fees to offset increased costs, which would adversely impact licensing applicants and increase uncertainty within the industry, according to officials. In addition, according to NRC officials, they could not identify a specific agency need that warranted the use of this authority while the federal hiring freeze was in effect.	Officials told us that they were considering the possibility of using this authority for staff at the Technical Training Center, which has experienced growing retention challenges due to retirements and continued struggles to recruit staff to fill positions. The smaller-scale use of the authority at the Training Center was the only case for which NRC was exploring the use of this authority, as of July 2026. According to NRC's workforce implementation plan, when existing tools and flexibilities are not enough to meet agency retention needs, NRC plans to give salary adjustments to improve retention rates for staff in mission-critical positions. Further, according to NRC's workforce implementation plan, NRC plans to leverage existing human capital frameworks to set pay scales.
Hiring bonuses	According to NRC officials, NRC does not plan to conduct direct hiring, the condition under which it would employ hiring bonuses, using the ADVANCE Act authorities while the agency continues to assess the results of the reorganization.	NRC plans to consider using hiring bonuses when the agency-wide reorganization evaluation and comprehensive workforce inventory are completed. According to NRC's workforce implementation plan, NRC will leverage existing human capital frameworks to provide timely and effective bonuses and awards to recruit new staff. In July 2026, NRC officials stated that NRC was in the process of updating its management directive for awards and recognition, broadening the language to include general guidance for requirements, processes, and roles and responsibilities to use its hiring bonuses authority. Officials told us that NRC plans to consider explicitly citing the ADVANCE Act as an additional authority in the formal updates to its management directives in fiscal years 2029 through 2031.

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) documents and information. | GAO-26-108737

[a]NRC's preexisting direct hire authority was granted under the Atomic Energy Act of 1954 (42 U.S.C. § 2201(d)). It gives NRC the authority to hire employees outside of the competitive civil service hiring process as deemed necessary. According to officials, NRC continues to use its preexisting direct hire authority to hire new staff into vacant positions across the agency. In July 2026, NRC had four direct hire public notice positions listed on USAJobs. The notices were for engineer, physical scientist, data scientist, and IT specialist positions.

[b]In January 2025, NRC issued the *Strengthening the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission Workforce Implementation Plan and Report* as required by section 502 of the ADVANCE Act. The act requires the report to describe evidence and supporting documentation to justify the plan and include budget

projections on the resulting costs and benefits. In the plan, NRC describes its planned approach to implement each of the three categories of ADVANCE Act workforce authorities.

[c]NRC officials stated that the updated management directives and related guidance have been communicated to managers to inform them how to use the workforce flexibilities, mandates, authorities, and tools, including the ADVANCE Act.

In January 2025, NRC issued *Strengthening the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission Workforce Implementation Plan and Report,* as required by section 502 of the ADVANCE Act. The plan describes how NRC will build on its pre-existing authorities and use the new ADVANCE Act authorities when the pre-existing authorities do not sufficiently address hiring and recruitment needs. Further, the plan describes NRC's methodology to strategically assess critical workforce needs and recognize exceptional performance.

However, the plan does not establish metrics for collecting data and evidence that will effectively measure determined outcome-oriented goals. Specifically, it does not contain metrics to enable NRC to determine the extent to which it has used its workforce authorities, including the ADVANCE Act authorities, to effectively support retention and recruitment of NRC's workforce. The ADVANCE Act did not require NRC to establish such metrics. In addition, officials told us that these metrics may not have been established because the ADVANCE Act was enacted in 2024 after NRC had finalized its metrics and performance indicators for its fiscal year 2022 through 2026 strategic planning cycle.[21]

As of July 2026, NRC proposed the inclusion of specific recruitment and retention goals and indicators in its strategic plan for fiscal years 2026 through 2030, which was under review by OMB, according to officials.[22] However, the new strategic plan had not yet been finalized, and it was not clear if the metrics would be in the final strategic plan approved by OMB. Nonetheless, NRC could also establish these metrics in other agency documents, such as its agency performance plan.

GAO's prior work on government reorganization identified key questions that agencies can use to assess the development and implementation of agency reforms based on leading practices.[23] Among them, agencies should establish metrics to collect the needed data and evidence that will effectively measure determined outcome-oriented goals. We found that NRC's management directive governing agency reorganizations does not include a requirement to establish metrics or track progress toward goals. According to NRC's strategic workforce planning document, the agency must develop a strategy to address gaps or surpluses, and a plan to execute the strategies, and measures for assessing progress.[24]

Given NRC's longstanding challenges with workforce recruitment and retention, NRC may find it difficult to determine if its current workforce flexibilities mandates, authorities, and tools adequately meet its evolving needs. By establishing metrics to measure the extent to which the ADVANCE Act authorities allow NRC to effectively address critical workforce needs, NRC can better assess whether the ADVANCE Act workforce authorities adequately address its workforce needs or whether modifications or additional authorities are needed before the hiring and compensation authorities sunset in 2034.

What effects do NRC and stakeholders expect the ADVANCE Act will have on NRC's workforce?

NRC officials and most of the stakeholders we interviewed stated that the authorities provided by the ADVANCE Act could be useful in the retention of critically skilled staff and recruitment of entry-level staff.

While NRC had only used one of the ADVANCE Act authorities as of July 2026, officials stated that the authorities offer opportunities to improve NRC's workforce.

- **Direct hire authority.** In addition to its preexisting direct hire authority, NRC can now directly hire exceptionally well-qualified staff into covered positions requiring specialized expertise or necessary to support timely, efficient, and effective agency performance. The direct hire ADVANCE Act authority also improves NRC's flexibility in addressing key workforce or skill gaps, according to NRC documentation.
- **Performance bonus authority.** The ADVANCE Act performance bonus authority is the most substantial change to NRC's available workforce authorities, according to officials. According to NRC documentation and officials, this authority has the potential to improve retention and recruitment of critically skilled staff to ensure timely and efficient mission delivery and agency readiness for novel regulatory challenges.
- **Compensation flexibility authority.** This authority has the potential to improve the retention of a high-quality workforce necessary for ensuring NRC's safety and security mission and other timely activities as nuclear technology advances, according to NRC officials and documentation.

Although the ADVANCE Act authorities have the potential to improve NRC's workforce retention and recruitment efforts, it is too soon to determine if they will help NRC fully address its workforce challenges over the long term, according to NRC officials. While NRC takes steps to predict future demands for advanced reactor licensing that may require additional staff and heightened workloads, agency and industry workforce conditions will continue to evolve in the future at unclear rates, according to officials and agency documentation.

Similarly, some stakeholders told us that the ADVANCE Act authorities expand NRC's recruitment and retention flexibilities, but that they were unsure if the authorities would be enough to address significant workforce gaps NRC may face in the future. For example, some of the stakeholders we interviewed stated that the ADVANCE Act authorities might not be sufficient for NRC to retain or recruit skilled mid-career staff as industry competition increases. According to half of the stakeholders we interviewed, the nuclear power industry offers more competitive compensation, greater flexible work opportunities (including the option to telework, which NRC generally does not provide), or the opportunity to work on innovative projects that NRC cannot provide for its staff, even with the ADVANCE Act authorities.

What other steps is NRC taking to address workforce challenges?

In addition to the ADVANCE Act workforce authorities, NRC can continue leveraging its recruitment and training programs and its efforts to improve hiring process efficiency. For example:

Recruitment and training. NRC has taken steps to improve its recruitment and training by leveraging existing programs. For example, to enhance recruitment and training of early career staff, NRC increased the number of applicants eligible for its Nuclear Regulator Apprenticeship Network program and increased the frequency of hiring to begin a new cohort every year.[25]

NRC engages with institutions of higher education and offers programs to recruit and train early career staff. For example, NRC

- manages the Co-Operative Education Program to hire college and university students pursuing degrees in fields related to NRC's mission;
- offers a Temporary Summer Student Program to introduce students to and provide them with experience on the agency's work and mission;

- maintains the University Champions Program in which 128 employees conduct outreach and knowledge sharing at 91 institutions as of June 2026, according to NRC officials; and
- provides grants to institutions to award scholarships and other financial assistance to students and new faculty in nuclear-related fields.

According to officials, NRC conducts these initiatives to expand its outreach and interactions with early career staff and strengthen the likelihood of them pursuing careers within the agency.

Hiring process efficiency. To improve hiring efficiency, NRC has taken steps to implement recommendations made in a 2024 NRC Office of the Inspector General (OIG) report, which found that longer hiring times can adversely impact recruitment.[26] Since December 2024, NRC has

- developed and updated its guidance on data quality controls and the hiring process;
- updated the format of hiring reports to ensure they clearly capture key information about the hiring process; and
- trained human resources specialists and redistributed tasks for hiring specialists.

Analysis of industry workforce data. NRC plans to collect and analyze hiring and supplemental industry data to identify positions that are mission critical and difficult to hire into. Using these data may allow officials to make informed decisions and recommendations for hiring and strategic workforce planning. Figure 8 presents the types of data NRC plans to analyze to inform its strategic workforce planning.

Figure 8: Data Sources the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) Plans to Leverage to Inform Strategic Workforce Planning

Source: GAO analysis of NRC documents and information. | GAO-26-108737

Accessible Data for Figure 8: Data Sources the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) Plans to Leverage to Inform Strategic Workforce Planning

- Hiring data
  - Internal vacancy announcements
  - Applicants per vacancy
  - Offer acceptance and declination rates
  - Turnover rates
  - Candidate qualifications
- Supplemental qualitative data
  - Hiring manager feedback
  - Offer rejection reasons
  - Exit interview data to inform turnover analysis.
- External labor market data
  - Demand for specific skills
  - Average salary expectations
  - Workforce availability.
- Comparative compensation data
  - Salary and benefits packages offered by industry competitors in the same geographic area.[b]
- Talent pool data
  - Labor market data to understand the availability of qualified candidates for specific positions.[a]

Source: GAO analysis of NRC documents and information. | GAO-26-108737

[a]NRC may use the results to better identify hiring challenges.

[b]Results can help identify NRC positions that are hard to fill.

Conclusions

Concerns have been raised about NRC's ability to hire and retain adequate staff to carry out reactor licensing and oversight activities in a timely and efficient manner. A recent executive order has led to a reorganization and other changes at the agency. NRC is developing a new strategic workforce planning tool that it expects will be key to its efforts to evaluate its workforce conditions and critical needs and strategically target the use of its ADVANCE Act authorities. NRC may not be able to effectively use the ADVANCE Act authorities until the tool is finalized. However, its time frame for finalizing the tool has been delayed multiple times. Finalizing the tool by the first quarter of fiscal year 2027, as planned, may help NRC strengthen its strategic workforce planning capabilities and facilitate informed decision-making on the use of the ADVANCE Act authorities going forward. A more thorough assessment of its workforce can better position NRC to take the necessary steps to address its workforce needs to support the fulfilment of its mission in a timely and efficient manner moving forward.

In addition, it is not clear that the existing authorities will sufficiently address the significant workforce challenges and needs NRC may face in the future, according to officials and some stakeholders. As of July 2026, NRC had not established metrics to evaluate whether its workforce authorities adequately address its needs. Establishing such metrics could help NRC determine if it has sufficient workforce flexibilities, authorities, and tools to meet its current and future needs before the ADVANCE Act hiring and compensation authorities sunset in 2034.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making the following two recommendations to the Chair of the NRC:

The Chair of the NRC should direct staff to finalize the NEXUS tool by the first quarter of fiscal year 2027, as planned, to identify critical staffing needs and assess where the ADVANCE Act authorities can be used to help NRC retain and hire staff necessary to support mission needs. (Recommendation 1)

The Chair of the NRC should direct staff to establish metrics to measure and assess whether existing workforce authorities adequately address NRC's workforce needs. (Recommendation 2)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to NRC for review and comment. NRC did not provide a formal comment letter. NRC staff told us they concurred with our recommendations. NRC also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

How GAO Did This Study

We reviewed section 502 of the ADVANCE Act to identify the workforce recruitment and retention authorities it grants NRC. To determine the extent to which NRC has used the ADVANCE Act authorities, we reviewed NRC documentation on its use of the authorities and interviewed NRC officials. In addition, we reviewed the relevant laws, policy, and agency documentation to describe NRC's other workforce recruitment and retention-related mandates, authorities, flexibilities, and tools.

We reviewed NRC's implementation plan required by the ADVANCE Act and other relevant reports, policies, and guidance documents and interviewed NRC officials to examine NRC's plan to use the authorities. To determine the extent to which NRC has begun implementing its plan, we reviewed documentation of steps NRC had taken as of July 2026 and interviewed NRC officials about the agency's planned or ongoing efforts. We assessed NRC's planned and ongoing actions against its relevant personnel management directives, selected key principles for effective strategic workforce planning, and leading practices for agency reform efforts.

To describe NRC and stakeholder views on workforce challenges and their perspectives on the effect of the authorities, we interviewed NRC officials and representatives from a nongeneralizable sample of 10 nuclear industry and nuclear policy organizations from September 2025 to June 2026. Specifically, we selected six advanced nuclear reactor developers, one licensed nuclear reactor operator, two policy groups, and one advocacy organization. We selected these organizations using a stratified purposeful sampling approach to capture a variety of perspectives and types of experiences working with NRC, including recent engagement in licensing activities. Because this was a nonprobability sample, the findings related to these organizations cannot be generalized to all stakeholders but provide illustrative examples of challenges NRC faces. For the purposes of this report, we used modifiers to characterize the views of the 10 selected stakeholders as follows: "some" represents two to four stakeholders, "half" represents five stakeholders, "most" represents six to seven, "nearly all" represents eight to nine, and "all" represents 10.

To determine the number of NRC employees, we analyzed NRC employee status data from July 2024 through June 2026. To calculate this amount, we analyzed the number of employees as of the last complete pay period in the respective quarter of the fiscal year. To determine the number of hiring and separation actions, we analyzed distinct employee hiring and separations that occurred from July 2024 through June 2026.

We also interviewed NRC officials for context on NRC's workforce composition to describe changes to NRC's workforce since the enactment of the ADVANCE Act. To determine the reliability of NRC's data, we (1) reviewed related documentation about the data and the systems NRC uses to manage the data,[27] (2) interviewed and corresponded with agency officials responsible for the data, and (3) performed electronic testing for missing values and obvious errors in accuracy and completeness. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purpose of reporting information about NRC's workforce from July 2024 through June 2026.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2025 to September 2026 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those

standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

List of Addressees

The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito
Chairman
The Honorable Sheldon Whitehouse
Ranking Member
Committee on Environment and Public Works
United States Senate

The Honorable Rand Paul, M.D.
Chairman
The Honorable Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Brett Guthrie
Chairman
The Honorable Frank Pallone Jr.
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce
House of Representatives

The Honorable James Comer
Chairman
The Honorable Robert Garcia
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
House of Representatives

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at http://www.gao.gov.

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Appendix I: Additional Information on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Workforce Mandates, Authorities, Flexibilities, and Tools

Atomic Energy Act of 1954. Section 161(d) of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954 establishes the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) as an excepted service agency, granting it the authority to hire employees outside of the competitive civil service hiring process.[28] It gives NRC the authority to directly hire and set compensation amounts, within certain limits, for its staff. This affords NRC some flexibility regarding general staff, though such staff cannot be paid a salary at a rate in excess of the rate payable to those within the competitive service for positions of equivalent difficulty or responsibility. For non-executive staff, this rate would be no higher than the cap for General Schedule Grade 15, Step 10, which is equivalent to level IV of the Executive Schedule.[29] Scientific and technical personnel, however, may be paid at a higher rate, up to the maximum rate of basic pay for level II of the Executive Schedule.[30]

Office of Personnel Management direct hire authority. Under section 3304(b)(3) of title V, United States Code, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) can grant direct hire authority to federal agencies when a critical hiring need or severe shortage of candidates exists to expedite the hiring process.[31] This authority applies to all competitive service positions at Grade 15 of the General Schedule and below, and it does not provide agencies with any pay flexibility. OPM denied NRC's request to obtain this authority in 2006 because it determined that the law did not apply to NRC's excepted-service positions. In 2019, NRC replicated OPM's direct hire procedures, using its own Atomic Energy Act section 161(d) authority, to help address staffing shortages and mission-critical positions.

Government-wide bonus authorities. Under sections 4505a and 5753 of title V, United States Code enacted in 1990, agencies can provide performance and hiring bonuses to staff. Performance bonuses may be granted to an employee whose most recent performance rating was at the fully successful level or higher (or the equivalent thereof). Generally, performance bonuses are not to exceed 10 percent of an employee's salary. An agency head may, however, authorize an award of up to 20 percent if exceptional performance justifies such an award. OPM may authorize agencies to pay hiring bonuses to certain employees when the position to which an individual is being appointed is likely to be difficult to fill in the absence of such a bonus. Payment of such bonuses is contingent on the employee entering a written service agreement for a period of up to 4 years. Generally, hiring bonuses are not to exceed 25 percent of an employee's salary. OPM, however, may authorize a bonus of up to 50 percent or in some cases up to 100 percent based on a critical agency need.

The Accelerating Deployment of Versatile, Advanced Nuclear for Clean Energy Act of 2024 (ADVANCE Act). Section 502 of the ADVANCE Act gives NRC additional direct hire authority and compensation flexibility.[32] It authorizes NRC to directly hire exceptionally well-qualified individuals into the excepted service for both temporary and permanent "covered" positions.[33] Covered positions are those in which an employee or other personnel is responsible for conducting work of a highly specialized scientific, technical, engineering, mathematical, or otherwise skilled nature to address a critical licensing or regulatory oversight need for NRC, or a position that the NRC Executive Director for Operations determines is necessary to fulfill the NRC responsibilities in a timely, efficient, and effective manner. Rates of pay for these positions may be fixed without regard to the provisions governing General Schedule classification and pay rates but must be commensurate with experience and qualifications and may not exceed level III of the Executive Schedule.

The act also authorizes NRC to provide hiring and performance bonuses not to exceed $25,000. These authorities cannot be used to appoint individuals to

positions in the Senior Executive Service, nor can they be used to fix the compensation of such individuals.

Executive Order 14300. In May 2025, the President issued an executive order to reform NRC. NRC was directed to take defined actions to reform its culture, structure, and regulations.

- In terms of culture, the executive order directed NRC to take actions such as revising its mission statement to include the facilitation of nuclear power while ensuring reactor safety, and to consider the benefits of increased availability and innovation of nuclear power in support of its mission.[34]
- In terms of structure, NRC was directed to conduct an agency reorganization to expedite license application processing, conduct reductions in force in conjunction with the reorganization, and create a dedicated team of at least 20 officials to draft new regulations directed by the executive order.
- In terms of regulations, NRC was directed to undertake a review and wholesale revision of its regulations and guidance documents, with notices of proposed rulemaking to be published within 9 months of the order.

The directed revisions included to establish fixed deadlines for NRC evaluation and approval of licenses, license amendments, and license renewals; adopt science-based radiation limits; establish an expedited pathway to approve reactor designs that the Departments of Defense or Energy have tested and that have demonstrated the ability to function safely; and establish a process for high-volume licensing of microreactors and modular reactors.

Endnotes

[1]Accelerating Deployment of Versatile, Advanced Nuclear for Clean Energy Act of 2024 (ADVANCE Act), Pub. L. No. 118-67, div. B, tit. V, § 502, 138 Stat. 1447, 1448 (codified at 42 U.S.C. § 2201b).

[2]Atomic Energy Act of 1954, Pub. L. No. 83-703, § 161(d), 68 Stat. 919, 948 (codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. § 2201(d)).

[3]For example, the ADVANCE Act authorizes NRC to directly hire exceptionally well-qualified individuals into “covered positions.” 42 U.S.C. § 2201b(a)(1)(A). While the ADVANCE Act generally defines types of positions that would be “covered,” it does not specify actual positions, and it allows NRC to add other types of positions it determines necessary to fulfill NRC responsibilities in a timely, efficient, and effective manner. *Id.* § 2201b(g). Unless and until NRC specifies covered positions and implements this authority, it is unclear how it will compare to NRC's preexisting workforce authorities.

[4]NRC has historically used a government-wide authority to provide performance bonuses. 5 U.S.C. § 4505a.

[5]NRC has historically used a government-wide authority to provide recruitment bonuses. 5 U.S.C. § 5753.

[6]The memorandum did not apply to military personnel of the armed forces or to positions related to immigration enforcement, national security, or public safety, and the Director of OPM was authorized to grant other necessary exemptions. The hiring freeze was extended in April 2025 and again in July 2025. The freeze expired in October 2025, but in that month an executive order instituted new parameters on federal hiring. Exec. Order No. 14356, 90 Fed. Reg. 48387 (Oct. 20, 2025).

[7]Two federal district courts issued orders temporarily pausing the termination of probationary employees and required their reinstatement at approximately 20 agencies. *See* Maryland v. U.S. Dep’t of Agric., 777 F. Supp. 3d 432 (D. Md. 2025); American Fed’n of Gov’t Emp., AFL-CIO v. U.S. Off. of Pers. Mgmt., 770 F. Supp. 3d 1215 (N.D. Cal. 2025). These orders were stayed, respectively, by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit and the U.S. Supreme Court. In September 2025, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit found that the states lacked standing in *Maryland v. U.S. Department of Agriculture* and the district court subsequently dismissed the lawsuit. 151 F.4th 197 (4th Cir. 2025). Also in September, the U.S. District Court for

the Northern District of California issued an order in the *American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO v. U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM)* case that OPM lacked the authority to direct other agencies to terminate their probationary employees and violated the Administrative Procedure Act. 799 F. Supp. 3d 967 (N.D. 2025). The government subsequently filed a notice of appeal. No. 25-5875 (9th Cir. Sept. 18, 2025).

[8]Electing employees would promptly have their duties reassigned or eliminated and be placed on administrative leave, except during necessary transition activities.

[9]The separation actions represent all employee separation actions that occurred in fiscal year 2025. Within this count, two employees had multiple separation actions.

[10]Within this, four employees had multiple separation actions.

[11]We define attrition as all resignations, retirements, terminations, and other separations of full-time permanent employees.

[12]U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, *Congressional Budget Justification, Fiscal Year 2027,* NUREG-1100, vol. 42 (Washington, D.C.: April 2026).

[13]U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, *Strengthening the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission Workforce Implementation Plan and Report* (January 2025).

[14]Half of the stakeholders we interviewed told us they hired former NRC staff.

[15]Our prior work similarly identified concerns about the constrained labor pool for critically skilled staff needed to support reactor licensing and oversight functions. See GAO, *Human Capital: Retirements and Anticipated New Reactor Applications Will Challenge NRC's Workforce*, GAO-07-105 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 17, 2007) and *Nuclear Power: NRC Needs to Take Additional Actions to Prepare to License Advanced Reactors,* GAO-23-105997 (Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2023).

[16]Exec. Order No. 14300, 90 Fed. Reg. 22587 (May 29, 2025) *(Ordering the Reform of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission)*.

[17]This includes positions with specific qualifications to conduct inspections of reactors and nuclear materials-related activities, positions responsible for examining operators of the 94 nuclear power reactors and 31 research and test reactors in the United States, and positions that review license applications for new and existing reactors.

[18]For example, section 505 of the ADVANCE Act creates an Office of Nuclear Reactor Regulation, which is supposed to, among other things, "establish techniques and guidance for evaluating applications for licenses for nuclear reactors to support efficient, timely, and predictable reviews of applications for those licenses to enable the safe and secure use of nuclear reactors."

[19]In July 2026, officials told us that NRC was evaluating the relationship between NEXUS and the government-wide transition to Core HCM 2.0 in fiscal year 2027. According to officials, Core HCM 2.0 is expected to include functionality that may overlap with some of the nonstrategic workforce planning components of NEXUS. As a result, NRC plans to ensure that implementation decisions minimize duplication between the two systems.

[20]GAO, *Human Capital: Key Principles for Effective Strategic Workforce Planning,* GAO-04-39 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 11, 2003).

[21]U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, *Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2022–2026* (Washington, D.C.: April 2022).

[22]As of July 2026, NRC's proposed strategic plan for fiscal years 2026 through 2030 was under review by OMB, according to officials. In July 2026, officials were uncertain when OMB's review would be completed.

[23]GAO, *Government Reorganization: Key Questions to Assess Agency Reform Efforts,* GAO-18-427 (Washington, D.C.: June 13, 2018).

[24]U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, *Enhanced Strategic Workforce Planning: Office Director and Regional Administrator Guidance* (October 2020).

[25]NRC's Nuclear Regulator Apprenticeship Network program previously had a new cohort every 2 years.

[26]U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Office of the Inspector General, *Audit of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Recruiting and Retention Activities*, OIG-NRC-25-A-03 (Rockville, Md.: Dec. 18, 2024).

[27]The systems NRC uses to process and store the workforce data we used in our report are the U.S. Department of the Interior's Interior Business Center Federal Personnel and Payroll System and the Interior Business Center DataMart system.

[28]Atomic Energy Act of 1954, Pub. L. No. 83-703, § 161(d), 68 Stat. 919, 948 (codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. § 2201(d)). The authority under this section was originally granted to the Atomic Energy Commission. Twenty years later, the Atomic Energy Commission was abolished and split into the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA), which was later absorbed into the Department of Energy. Under the Energy Reorganization Act of 1974, ERDA and NRC both retained authorities under section 161(d) of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954.

[29]The Executive Schedule has five levels, V being the lowest and I being the highest.

[30]Specifically, the law states "That no officer or employee (except such officers and employees whose compensation is fixed by law, and scientific and technical personnel up to a limit of the highest rate of grade 18 of the General Schedule of the Classification Act of 1949, as amended) … shall be paid a salary at a rate in excess of the rate payable under such Act for positions of equivalent difficulty or responsibility." 42 U.S.C. § 2201(d). Grades 16-18 of the General Schedule were eliminated in 1990. The law provides that references in other laws to the maximum rate of pay for grade 18 shall be considered a reference to the maximum rate payable under section 5 U.S.C. § 5376. Federal Employees Pay Comparability Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-509, tit. V, 104 Stat. 1389, 1427. That rate is level II of the Executive Schedule for an employee covered by a performance appraisal system certified under 5 U.S.C. § 5307, which the NRC's system is.

[31]In June 2004, the Office of Personnel Management promulgated regulations to implement this provision at 5 C.F.R. pt. 337, subpt. B.

[32]Pub. L. No. 118-67, div. B, tit. V, § 502(a), 138 Stat. 1447, 1471 (2024) (codified at 42 U.S.C. § 2201b).

[33]Temporary positions may not exceed 4 years. The authority is limited to 210 permanent positions at any one time and 20 temporary positions during any fiscal year.

[34]NRC updated its mission statement in January 2025, in response to the ADVANCE Act. The mission statement reads: "The NRC protects public health and safety and advances the nation's common defense and security by enabling the safe and secure use and deployment of civilian nuclear energy technologies and radioactive materials through efficient and reliable licensing, oversight, and regulation for the benefit of society and the environment."