ANS Nuclear Policy Wire

The ANS Nuclear Policy Wire is pleased to announce our newest initiative, the Nuclear All-Stars series! We'll be interviewing some of nuclear's biggest advocates in Congress to chat about upcoming legislation and why nuclear is important to them.

ANS Washington Representative Craig Piercy recently sat down with Congressman Adam Kinzinger (IL-16), our inaugural Nuclear All-Star. Below is a transcript of the conversation.

Craig Piercy: I see you have recently introduced the NUKE Act… the goal [of the bill] is to try to create some financial guardrails around the NRC and really protect the licensees from expenses they do not have. Give me your sense on why this bill, and why now.

Rep. Adam Kinzinger: A lot of the struggles with nuclear have to do with the market. Long term, we have to focus on how to level the playing field for folks and ensure that something like nuclear stays competitive. It provides huge baseload power, but when you have moments when the wind is blowing heavy, sometimes nuclear has to go negative and sell at negative rates, which is not beneficial. Those are the longer term [issues] we want to look at, but what can we do in the short term to help nuclear out?

One of the things we heard about a lot was…I don't know if the word "antiquated" is right, but this burdensome regulatory environment. We always want the best nuclear safety and an effective NRC, but to be an efficient and effective NRC I think it needs some reforms. So we put a lot of reforms [into this bill]: licensing fees, licensing structure, we are looking at what we need to do if there's no opposition to future licensing issues. In essence, how do we make it work better for the consumer? That is really what this ultimately comes down to: how do we benefit the consumer? We even do things [in the bill] like looking forward into studies about [the possibility of] other nations co-owning with the United States.

We are living in a relic of the Cold War, when now it has gone from an issue of nuclear weapons to [one of] energy and power. I think that is important for Americans to recognize, so this bill hopefully re-engages Congress a little bit on the importance of nuclear. But this to me is a foreign policy issue as well. I have an interest in energy and foreign policy and nuclear is a good nexus [of the two]. We are losing our competitive market edge right now to the other nations around the globe and I think for national security as well as the economy, it is important to regain that edge.

CP: Obviously there are a lot of policy activities in the new Congress. We have a new opportunity to do something on the back end of the fuel cycle with you. Broadly as it relates to nuclear… how do you define success, how *can* you define success in the 115th Congress?

AK: In the 115th Congress, I would love to see this bill included, and I think we have a fairly good shot at that. That is an initial success.

I think this is a time to deal with spent fuel. Whether that is directly with Yucca Mountain, whether it is some to Yucca, some to interim storage, or whatever that ends up looking like. It has to happen because in my district for instance, I have four power plants, the most of any in the country, but I also have five spent fuel storage areas. The original GE plant for nuclear recycling back in the 60s is now spent fuel storage. I think this issue is important to get a grip on and with Harry Reid out of the way, thankfully, I think we have an opportunity to move forward. We have obviously got to do this in a bipartisan way, but how do we bring Nevada on board? This is a benefit to the state [of Nevada]. I think getting the information out about how safe the transportation of this material is [will be important]. I mean, we transfer nukes around the country every day anyway. I think that would be good near-term success.

In the longer term, again we have to look at how to level the playing field to allow nuclear to be out there and competitive again, because it provides such huge baseload power. Whether you are concerned with carbon output for climate change issues or not, more people are becoming aware and concerned about it. Even if you are not concerned, you have to admit that carbon-neutral energy production is a good thing.

CP: Right, and if you don't care about carbon, you care about SOX, NOX, and particulates.

AK: Yeah, and you care about jobs, great jobs.

CP: Do you think that there is a fair amount of flexibility on the part of members of Congress here in the House and Senate to say, "Ok, we've all been dug in our little foxholes these past few years"? Do you think there's a new flexibility that says, "Hey, we recognize that there's something that needs to be done," or do you think that some of those old barriers are still out there?

AK: I think you will always have some old barriers, but I think we do have some new flexibility. Part of the issue is back in the early 2000s when Yucca Mountain was a big controversial issue, people [got] buried in their sides and they are on the record as whatever statement they [were]. Once you are on the record as one thing, it is hard to change your mind. There are a lot of people out here, from my freshmen class…who have never been on the front page [about nuclear]. You have a new crop of people who have been here since 2010, and probably even before that, that are not on the record and, I think, "get it". The other thing: Yucca Mountain has not cost the government. This is rate-payers that have already paid for it. We have enough spent fuel that we have to expand already.

CP: Obviously you have four power plants in your district. But beyond that, what do you like about nuclear? What's the thing that surprised you the most, or impressed you the most?

AK: I knew vaguely about it when I got elected. I knew that it was important but as I have gotten to know more about it, it has good reliability. The jobs thing is great; the economic input is great, and all that, but grid reliability is extremely important. When we deal with…extreme cold or extreme heat, or any weather phenomena that happens, nuclear is always there to cover that baseload of power required and you build peaker plans to deal with the ups and downs. Nuclear does it at a carbon-neutral size.

I'm excited about future technology in terms of nuclear and helping these developing countries as they try to get a grip on their power, whether that is electrify Africa or some of these other initiatives we have. So for me, it is that steady reliability. That has been the most impressive thing.

On a side note, I went to a school of one of the power plants in my district, Byron, and I remember walking in the school and being impressed with the building and the quality of students. These are kids that are kids of nuclear engineers. They know stuff, they are really smart kids and these are kinds of people that we are producing in those communities. They will be great for the future of the country, whatever role they play.

CP: Thank you. I appreciate your time.