ENERGYWIRE
AN E&E NEWS PUBLICATION

Q&A

Nuclear CEO on coronavirus, climate and the 'dark' outlook

Edward Klump, E&E News reporter

Published: Tuesday, April 21, 2020

American Nuclear Society CEO Craig Piercy sees an important role for nuclear power in addressing climate change. Justin Cox Photography/American Nuclear Society

Craig Piercy, the new CEO of the American Nuclear Society, sees a strong parallel between public safety precautions during the current pandemic and those taken regularly by nuclear workers.

With the novel coronavirus, Piercy said, people are making "millions of little tiny risk decisions every day" against something that is invisible and could cause harm. That's much like nuclear plant workers closely watching their exposure to radiation.

"That sounds very familiar to everyone in the nuclear community in terms of the issues that they deal with, right?" Piercy said during an interview by phone from his home in Bethesda, Md.

Piercy, 54, was tapped last year to lead ANS, an Illinois-based society that includes more than 10,000 scientists, engineers, educators and others. Before that, he spent time at Bose Public Affairs Group and was the Washington representative for ANS. He also has worked for Wayne State University and the late Rep. Joe Knollenberg (R-Mich.).

He's now the face of the nuclear society as the industry undergoes a major test from the coronavirus and potentially sick employees.

Power companies are trying to conduct planned refueling outages and avoid other disruptions while seeking exemptions from some work hour limits and deferrals of certain inspections (***Energywire***, April 3).

Although critics **worry** about the spread of the virus and are calling for refueling to stop, Piercy defended regulators as taking an approach that allows flexibility. He emphasized efforts to address the greatest and most common risks.

"Nobody in the industry and nobody that works at a nuclear plant wants that plant to be less safe, right?" he said. "They're the ones that are there."

While Piercy said the industry's outlook today is "dark" because of how power markets are structured in large parts of the United States, he sees "light on the horizon" as some at-risk reactors stay open.

Piercy talked to E&E News about the dangers the nuclear industry is juggling during the pandemic and the technology's role in a warming world:

What are some early takeaways on how the coronavirus is changing the nuclear industry and the people in it?

The nuclear/COVID-19 story is a positive one, right, in the sense that you have an industry that has a pandemic response plan in the can already and so they have been implementing it.

There's defense and depth in the way that these plants are operated. The one thing I will say about my house is the lights have stayed on the entire time, and that's a credit to the people in the electricity industry and the nuclear sector.

Given the coronavirus, should refuelings at nuclear plants be happening right now, and can they be done safely?

Absolutely these refuelings can be done safely. And I think, again, it is the testament to the planning that goes into these refueling outages and the manpower that is brought to the tasks. Everyone now in every industry is faced with the challenge of how do you overlay social distancing onto the processes that they already have.

The sneeze shields go up in grocery stores and greater use of [personal protective equipment], and so that same thing is going on right now in terms of managing physical proximity during a refueling outage. I'm confident that the men and women that are engaging in these efforts now ... are addressing social distancing and the other safeguards that you need.

These are essential workers. These plants are providing clean energy. It's part of our critical infrastructure. I think you have to move forward. You have to adapt rather than quit.

Are members saying they don't want to be there or don't think it's safe to be there?

No. I think if anything, COVID-19 has increased people's commitments to the technology. And I think they recognize that it's a critically important part of keeping this country running, especially in uncertain times. I think that they see it as a duty.

We've seen reports of requests for inspection deferrals at nuclear plants. And the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has allowed increased working hours for people at some plants. Some people may temporarily live at power plants.

It's providing a little bit of temporary flexibility to operate in this environment.

I don't want anybody left with the impression that somehow they're doing this because we're stretched out over the edge in terms of safety. Every plant has plenty of people that can run that reactor. It's just a function of putting them in at the right time.

You worked for the late Rep. Knollenberg. How did that experience shape your views on nuclear?

Working for Joe and working on Capitol Hill in the 1990s was really my formative experience on this issue.

When the Republicans took over in the 1994 election, he got a slot on the Appropriations Committee and ended up with the Energy and Water [Subcommittee], which neither of us really knew anything about. But we opened up [the] last year's committee report and went through it and recognized — saw all the nuclear spending.

We — and I specifically — developed ... a deep appreciation for the role of the technology.

Radiation has a big, big role to play in saving lives in medicine, not only through sterilization ... but also through isotopes for diagnosing and therapies for disease.

Do you support nuclear as a way to combat climate change?

It's a significant part of the backdrop in any conversation about nuclear energy going forward, whether it's the existing fleet or advanced reactors. The ultimate success of nuclear, the degree to which nuclear is successful, will be decided in large part because of our — what our relative appetite for decarbonization is. Nuclear is always going to have a role.

There's clearly a role for dispatchable, nonemitting generation, and nuclear is really the only one right now.

I think the real question is where are we in 2030 and what are we doing, and that will be guided by what we do on climate.

Do you think climate action will be able to cut through politics, whether it's a carbon price on emissions or something else?

Right now, I almost see it being driven more through local governments and business communities and business and corporate sustainability objectives.

At some point we will have a political alignment that will allow for federal action on carbon, but I still think that it's going to be driven by states and driven by businesses — and that the federal government is an actor in that but will not be the lead actor or does not necessarily have to be the lead actor.

So you don't feel like we're particularly close to some sort of carbon price nationally?

It's so hard to know. I can envision a scenario where that might happen. Realistically, right now, everything is going to be COVID for the next, you know, six, 12 or 18 months, right? Climate seems like a much more existential threat than COVID does now.

If soon is within five years, yeah, I think that I could see a scenario — you know, several scenarios — where that might happen.

Does nuclear power resonate more with Republicans or Democrats at this point?

It's weird. It's both.

I think that nuclear power resonates with centrists and with pragmatists. Climate really, at the end of the day, is a math problem. And it's how much energy you use and how much emissions you generate using that energy.

I see people on both sides. On the far right, you kind of have the climate deniers, and then on the far left you have radical environmentalists that want to significantly restrict people's energy consumption in their daily lives. So we're never going to get those people. But I do believe that there's sort of a bipartisan centrist constituency that you're probably going to need for climate change broadly, and that there is that base of support that lives in the middle there.

Do you have a wish list for D.C. action?

There's been some tremendous progress made in the last few years to getting the nuclear [research and development] budget to a level it needs to be in order for us to have those capabilities ready for 2030 and beyond.

The scale needs to be larger than what we're looking at now for nuclear R&D, but also recognize that the payoff is potentially much greater, too. This is about having this option at the ready and doing the R&D and the development work to have that option on the table at a time when we're ready to get serious about decarbonization.

My wish list would be continued federal stewardship of nuclear [research] and development.

Is there a number attached to that?

I'm putting a group of people together to give me a better idea [of] what that number should be.

The Office of Nuclear Energy, which right now is [around $1.5 billion for fiscal 2020]. It needs to be higher.

Do you expect to see more people attempt big nuclear power units, or do you see smaller reactors?

I don't see large reactors [developed] in this country in the short term. I can see those in an international context for sure. For the next few years, we're going to be looking at the development of those smaller modular technologies and really proving the business model of [small modular reactors] and advanced reactors.

And I think that's where you have the highest potential for scale-up is in sort of mastering that economy of production. That's not to say that ... large nuclear won't make a comeback, but I

think that there are going to have to be some really favorable policies in place in order for that to occur.

So the expansion that's underway at Plant Vogtle in Georgia might be the last big U.S. nuclear project for a while?

I think it's going to be the last big one for a while, yeah.

What's the outlook for nuclear?

It's dark right now, but you can see dawn right over the horizon.

We are going to have to get to the nucleus to get the kind of power that we need to power the society of our future with the kind of standard of living that we expect.

And so for that reason, just the energy density alone, I believe that the future is very bright for nuclear, but it requires a better public understanding and public acceptance of the technology. And that's something that the industry hasn't done a good job of historically and ... we need to get better at. And that's certainly an area where ANS is going to be looking to have greater impact.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Want to read more stories like this?

Click here to start a free trial to E&E -- the best way to track policy and markets.

ABOUT ENERGYWIRE – THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ENERGY SECTOR

Energywire is written and produced by the staff of E&E News. Energywire is designed to bring readers deep, broad and insightful coverage of the transformation of the energy sector. Energywire focuses on the business, environmental and political issues surrounding the rapidly expanding unconventional energy industry and the numerous factors -- from expanding natural gas use to renewables and more -- that are altering the traditional electric utility industry. Energywire publishes daily at 9:00 a.m.

E&E NEWS

E&E News
122 C Street NW 7th Floor Washington, DC 20001
Phone: 202-628-6500 Fax: 202-737-5299
www.eenews.net

All content is copyrighted and may not be reproduced or retransmitted without the express consent of Environment & Energy Publishing, LLC. Click here to view our privacy policy.