THIRD WAY

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Don't Look Now, But Washington Might Just be Leading on Nuclear Innovation

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While most of the energy and climate world's attention is focused on the climate negotiations in Paris, the House Science Committee is taking an important, but little noticed, step in the fight for clean energy. As we have highlighted time and time again, advanced nuclear energy presents a critical opportunity for the United States to develop reliable, affordable, and clean energy to address climate change and meet growing energy demand in the developing world. But to get there, the U.S. government must provide more research support to private sector entrepreneurs working on nuclear innovation. New bipartisan legislation from the Science Committee would do just that.

The House Bill H.R. 4084 would provide much needed R&D capabilities and infrastructure for advanced nuclear energy development, including enhanced computational tools, the construction of a new fast spectrum test reactor, and the establishment of a dedicated budget. This answers innovators' need for access to federal research and development facilities where they can test their fuels, materials, and coolants, and maximize the safety of their reactors. While the Department of Energy (DOE) National Laboratories hold extensive nuclear research infrastructure, a fast spectrum test reactor is a major missing element in the R&D infrastructure of the United States. The House Subcommittee's proposal to establish a fast spectrum test reactor would help move innovative reactor designs into the demonstration stage and push the U.S. into a competitive position in this field.

This point was brought home by venture capitalist Ray Rothrock, a former chairman of the National Venture Capital Association, who is an investor in several advanced nuclear

companies and advisor to Third Way. Rothrock testified before the House Subcommittee on Energy in support of the nuclear innovation bill. He urged the United States to move quickly to provide a clear path forward for private sector nuclear innovation, warning that if this does not happen, "... investors will go away and the entrepreneurs will seek other jurisdictions in which to operate resulting in the United States losing this new found market of advanced nuclear innovation."

This call to arms for clean energy innovation is being answered globally through President Obama's November 30th announcement of Mission Innovation and the establishment of the Breakthrough Energy Coalition – spearheaded by Bill Gates. Together, these initiatives aim to dramatically scale up public and private investments for clean energy innovation to get us to the deep carbon reductions we need.

On a domestic level, the House Subcommittee's proposal follows the November 6th White House announcement of the Gateway for Accelerated Innovation in Nuclear program, which will make it much easier for private companies to access federal facilities and expertise for advanced nuclear innovation. Additionally, the DOE and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) have made great strides to increase support for the development and commercialization of advanced nuclear reactor designs.

However, there is still a great deal of work that needs to be done. We hope that Congress will continue to build on these efforts and begin to acknowledge the critical importance of nuclear energy to the U.S. energy portfolio and the vital role that the U.S. government plays in the future of the advanced nuclear energy sector.

TOPICS

ADVANCED NUCLEAR 81