

Dennis Spurgeon: Raising nuclear's influence at the DOE

Dennis Spurgeon was sworn in on April 3, 2006, as assistant secretary for nuclear energy at the Department of Energy. This marked the return of the civilian nuclear operation to the level of assistant secretary within the DOE, after several years of its being headed by a lower-ranking director. It also marked Spurgeon's return to federal service: He was assistant director for fuel cycle in a DOE predecessor, the U.S. Energy Research and Development Administration.

A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Spurgeon rose to the rank of captain in the Navy. He later worked at General Atomic Company and became chief operating officer at United Nuclear Corporation. Before his appointment at the DOE, he was executive vice president and chief operating officer of USEC, Inc., the private concern that has assumed responsibility for what had been the federal government's uranium enrichment plants. He also holds a master's degree in nuclear engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Spurgeon, a member of the American Nuclear Society since 2001, discussed various aspects of his position in a telephone interview with *NN* Senior Associate Editor E. Michael Blake.

The Department of Energy's Office of Nuclear Energy is once again headed by an assistant secretary, who is also the coordinator of the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership.



Spurgeon: "There's a compatibility of what we are doing with what the new Democratic majority would find important."

Your position as the head of the Office of Nuclear Energy has been restored to the rank of assistant secretary. Does this give nuclear energy programs greater influence within the DOE or before Congress?

It's hard to say. Obviously, from the standpoint of this being a Senate-confirmed political appointee position, there is a difference in stature. Whether or not that translates to more influence depends on a lot of things, including the attitude of the department toward the importance of nuclear energy, but I think that I have the absolute support of the secretary and the deputy secretary for me to carry out the duties of this position.

The one other hat that I wear is as the program manager for the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership. GNEP is more than just an Office of Nuclear Energy program. The National Nuclear Security Administration, the Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management, and the Office of Science are all key players in GNEP, and I coordinate their activities as they relate to GNEP.

Since the Nuclear Power 2010 program was established, some utilities have begun license preparation efforts of their own. Do you think that Nuclear Power 2010 still has a worthwhile mission?

Well, obviously it does, because I think those people who are beginning those licensing efforts are doing so with the understanding that through NP 2010, and through the arrangement with NuStart and Dominion Energy, we are helping to pave the way through the combined operating license [COL] process. And by doing so, we'll allow those that follow through that process to be able not only to reference it but to have a substantially shorter period of time for the review of their COLs.

I believe it all comes down to getting sufficient work done such that not only can these utilities apply for the combined operating license, but vendors can provide to the

utilities quotes that are on or near a fixed-price basis prior to the time that a commitment is actually made to purchase these plants.

Will the change in party control of Congress have any effect on the DOE nuclear energy programs, both on funding and on direction?

Well, I'm not saying I have a crystal ball as to what the new leadership's position will be on all issues affecting nuclear energy, but I think there are certainly some general objectives that we have heard from the new Democratic leadership—such as the emphasis on climate change—that will support a more positive view of nuclear energy. I think that what we are doing in GNEP and how it supports our nation's nonproliferation objectives is certainly something that the Democratic leadership will support, as well as what GNEP eventually will do long-term to help reduce the volume and toxicity of high-level waste. So I think in general there's a compatibility of what we are doing with what the new Democratic majority would find important, and therefore I certainly hope that we will see continued support.

Of the 11 potential GNEP facility sites, how many do you think the DOE will select? Is it better to have them concentrated in one or two places, for program management purposes?

Long-term I think there's going to be a need for several sites wherein you would have a recycling facility and also recycling reactors. There has to be one site that is first, and this selection is not in the immediate future. We have not said that this is a requirement, but the best way to do that is to have the recycling center and the recycling reactors collocated. But longer term, the idea that you have these facilities located regionally around the country is also, I think, the preferred alternative.

What progress has been made on issuing a final rule on loan guarantees for new power reactors?

The department is preparing a draft rule that will go out for public comment. I think we would follow the same procedure that we did for standby support, which we went through last year and issued the final rule last summer.

Does that need the input of other agencies—the Internal Revenue Service, and so forth?

The IRS is mainly involved in the production tax credits, and it has published implementing regulations for that. But loan guarantees obviously have a Treasury component to them. We have an interagency process that we need to be cognizant of.

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Some industry officials have said that the administration has been inconsistent in its goals for nuclear energy, such as in the shift from the Advanced Fuel Cycle Initiative to GNEP. Do you believe that the large, long-term nuclear programs, like GNEP, the Next Generation Nuclear Plant (NGNP), and the Nuclear Hydrogen Initiative are coordinated with one another, or should some adjustments still be made to them?

Well, if they're not coordinated, then I guess I'm probably not doing my job, because they all fall under my office. GNEP does not displace the Advanced Fuel Cycle Initiative—AFCI is an integral component of GNEP—and there's no intention for it to go away. GNEP embraces the fast-reactor development program that we support both internationally and in the United States by the Generation IV International Forum, which, by the way, encompasses also the gas-cooled reactor, which is NGNP. So the answer is they're all under one umbrella.

Now, I often get questions about what that means relative to priority and funding. The answer I like to give, to our industry colleagues in general, is that we need to emphasize the importance of nuclear energy to our energy security, and the importance of energy security to national security. And in doing so, we need to worry less about how we divide a small nuclear pie into slices, and focus more on the justification for increasing the size of the budget for nuclear energy. The point here is we need more support for all aspects that are key to nuclear energy's future. We should not be worrying about whether there's more funding going into GNEP than to NGNP, or to 2010, etc., but focus more on improving the overall scope and importance that's placed on ensuring that nuclear energy plays a major role in our nation's energy future. **NW**