

Some in nuclear industry surprised by UCS support for new nuclear

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To the surprise of some in the **nuclear** industry, the Union of Concerned Scientists, a prominent group that has historically been critical of **nuclear power** operations on safety grounds, has recently said it is supportive of existing and new **nuclear power** under certain conditions.

UCS President Ken Kimmell said in an interview June 29 that the group supports comprehensive clean energy policies that would allow existing and new power reactors to compete in the electricity marketplace with carbon-free generating sources, including **renewables**.

Kimmell made similar remarks at a virtual event hosted by **Nuclear Energy** Institute June 24.

“**We**’ve never been against all **nuclear power**,” Kimmell said. “**We**’ve always been a stickler for **nuclear power** safety, and **we** still are.”

There are cases in which UCS “would support state efforts to value the non-carbon attributes of **nuclear [power]**,” such as zero-emission credit programs to subsidize **nuclear** generation, subject to certain criteria, Kimmell said.

UCS supports “across-the-board, or in some cases, specific policies that would enable existing reactors to stay operating, provided that the plants meet safety criteria, that policymakers support **renewables** and efficiency incentives at the same time, and that any subsidies for **nuclear** plants are cost-effective compared to alternatives,” Kimmell said.

Susan Tierney, senior advisor at Analysis Group and a former assistant secretary for policy at the **US** Department of Energy, said in an email July 15, “I have known and respected UCS for

decades. It produces work of high technical quality and value, and its advocacy is evidence-based. UCS continues to take seriously its role as a watchdog of the **nuclear** industry.”

Rich Powell, executive director of Clear Path, an organization advocating for clean energy innovation and climate policy, said in a July 7 email, “Organizations are starting to move away from adamantly opposing what they are traditionally not for, and becoming more open to clean energy solutions. A perfect example is **NEI** hosting an event to see how they can partner with **renewables**, and UCS being open minded to the flexibility and reliability of **nuclear power**.”

Maria Korsnick, president and CEO of **NEI**, said in an email June 30, “**We** are pleased that UCS joined our event to discuss the outlook for a carbon-free future. Their participation is truly a testament to the evolution **we** have seen in support of **nuclear energy**. And **we** are even more encouraged by Ken’s comments in support of across the board policies that would give new **nuclear power** plants the opportunity to compete.”

Yet Eric Epstein, chairman of Three Mile Island Alert, which has been critical of **nuclear power** operations at certain plants, said in a July 14 email, “UCS was a critical entity monitoring safety and security, tracking trends, and providing engineering and technical solutions based on science. [It] was America’s ‘shadow regulator’ and held the **NRC** accountable.” He said that UCS “possessed the engineering and technical credentials that could not be dismissed by the **nuclear** industry.”

Now, UCS “has abandoned its decades’ old commitment to rigorous oversight of the industry in exchange for pro-**nuclear** pompoms,” Epstein added.

However, Edwin Lyman, director of **nuclear power** safety at UCS, said in a July 15 email, “I’ve been at UCS for more than 17 years. Over that time our advocacy for stronger **nuclear** safety and security standards has remained steadfast, and **we** have never hesitated to speak out and push back against the industry and the **NRC** when they move to weaken those standards ... Our policy positions are always informed by rigorous technical analysis, and **we** keep an open mind when evaluating new information.”

Lyman noted, “**We** have never advocated for the continued operation of plants that endanger public health and safety ... **We** do not support subsidies that would keep unsafe plants online.”

‘Difficult to cooperate’

Kimmell said at **NEI**'s virtual event June 24 there have been instances in which it was "difficult to cooperate" with the **nuclear** industry.

"**We** could not support [**Ohio** House Bill 6] that would provide subsidies for **nuclear** reactors, gutting energy efficiency ... [and helping] the **nuclear power** industry at the expense of **renewables** and other carbon-free sources," Kimmell said June 29. The bill removed a "100% **renewable** energy standard," he said June 24. That bill was signed into law in July 2019.

Yet "**we** were able to find common ground in **Illinois**," Kimmell said June 29. "While [the Clean Energy Jobs Act] does provide support to existing **nuclear** reactors, it also [supports] energy efficiency and energy storage."

Kimmell said June 24 that in order to achieve 100% clean energy, groups should "abandon a tribalistic attachment to particular solutions," adding, "there could be quite a bit of collaboration with those who think **nuclear power** is the answer and those who think **renewables** are the future." UCS does not "see a huge role for **nuclear**. It's an important one, but not huge," he said June 29.

Bud Albright, president of **US Nuclear** Industry Council, said in an interview July 7 that he has been in discussions with environmental and clean energy groups, which he declined to identify, and those groups agree that "you cannot reach the [clean energy] goals ... without **nuclear**. The goal should be lowered emissions, not picking one technology over the other."

Allison Macfarlane, director of the Institute for International Science and Technology Policy at George **Washington** University and a former **NRC** chairman, said in a July 15 email, "UCS has provided and continues to provide essential, independent information on the **nuclear** industry and regulators. They are a high-integrity organization and one of the few that provides actual technical policy analysis outside of government and industry sources."

However, Paul Gunter, director of reactor oversight of the anti-**nuclear** group Beyond **Nuclear**, said in an email July 14 that UCS' position "undercuts the **renewable energy community** that the anti-**nuclear** movement has long supported."

Epstein agreed, saying in a July 13 email that "UCS has lost its way and negotiated a Faustian pact with the **nuclear** industry. UCS supports bailing out an aging industry that is on life support."

TMIA “worked cooperatively with UCS four decades,” but UCS has lately “refus[ed] to discuss issues of mutual interest,” Epstein added.

UCS “has worked with [TMIA] and will continue to do so. I am not aware of any instance in which **we** refused to have a discussion with them,” Lyman said.

Steve Clemmer, director of energy research and analysis for UCS Climate and Energy Program, said in a July 15 email, “Our position on **nuclear power** is not undercutting **renewables**. UCS is bullish on **renewable** energy.” He added, “Allowing existing **nuclear** plants that meet high safety standards to be replaced with **natural gas** would take **us** in the wrong direction.”

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