

New Congressional Caucus Focuses on Research and Development

Tom Price

Almost from the moment Rep. Judy Biggert took her seat in Congress in early 1999, research and development commanded her attention.

President Clinton's budget, released shortly after Congress convened, proposed cutting an electrometallurgical research project at Argonne National Laboratory, a major scientific and economic engine in the Illinois Republican's district. Biggert's first major task in Washington became trying to save the project. "It was a project to find ways to lessen nuclear waste," Biggert recalled in a recent interview. "They were working to solidify part of it so you could store a lot of the waste in less space. I went to all my Illinois delegation and to other members (of Congress), talking about how important this research was, and we got the money back."

Biggert, a lawyer by trade, has now teamed up with New Jersey Democrat Rush Holt, one of the few scientists in Congress, to send members of both houses a broader message about the importance of R&D. The two have led creation of the Congressional Research and Development Caucus.

The caucus' first program, in late October, focused on how R&D could help address America's electric energy challenges. In March, the caucus sponsored a briefing for lawmakers and their staff about science programs in President Bush's 2005 budget.

Unlike congressional committees, caucuses have no formal power. But a caucus can be a vehicle for discussions among like-minded lawmakers and their aides, for promotion of a cause and for education of legislators who don't know much about the caucus' pet issues. Caucuses do this by sponsoring programs, like those on energy and the budget, and by communicating with other lawmakers. They often work closely with



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organizations outside Congress that share the same interests.

According to Holt, who asked Biggert to join him in founding the caucus, Congress needs a panel that "looks at research and development from a broad perspective." Among Congress' 300 or so caucuses, task forces and coalitions, Holt noted, some are interested in a specific kind of research—on autism, transportation, diabetes, steel or even potatoes, for instance. Official jurisdiction for R&D in Congress is divided among committees. Even the House Science Committee "deals only with some aspects of research," Holt

said. As a result, Holt and Biggert contend, Congress' approach to R&D is too fragmented and most lawmakers don't know much about it.

The caucus leaders plan to address a full range of R&D subjects and the ways they can be supported. "We'll look at R&D in defense, homeland security and food safety," Biggert said. "We'll look at the R&D workforce and the tie-ins between research and science and education. We want the other members to understand the value of R&D to the issues we address in the legislative body

today, and how investment today benefits our children and grandchildren in years to come."

The caucus will study not only federal R&D spending, Holt said, but also "corporate research, academic research and the roles the federal government plays in encouraging private investment." The panel's bipartisan nature coincides with this broad agenda, Holt and Biggert said. "It's not a parochial or regional concern: it's national and cuts across a lot of interest groups," Holt said. "So I think it can't be partisan."

"For those of us drawn to science," Biggert said, "this is something we can all agree upon. It doesn't get to be as political as other issues we face."

The caucus' first meeting demonstrated the opportunity it provides scientific organizations to present their messages to Congress.

Caucus aides asked the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) to help prepare the program, and IEEE was eager to oblige, said Bill Williams, a legislative representative for IEEE-USA, the organization's public policy arm in the United States.

The bipartisanship makes it easier for private science and engineering organizations to work with the caucus, Williams said.

“Working with them,” he said, “we’re hoping to shine a spotlight on R&D issues in Congress. We think there may not be enough attention placed on that because there’s just not a lot of knowledge in Congress about it.”

OSA Public Policy Committee Chair Elizabeth Kunkee agrees that science will benefit from “having a dedicated group of representatives looking at long-term R&D.”

“We’re thrilled to be able to raise awareness in the House of Representatives of the importance of R&D and the issues that face scientists and engineers,” said Kunkee, staff engineer and section head for photonics at Northrop Grumman Space Technology in Redondo Beach, Calif.

Kunkee said the caucus’ broad approach is important because of the “interdependency of research efforts across disciplines and funding agencies.”



U.S. Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham and Congresswoman Biggert learn how Argonne National Laboratory is developing new ways to address some of our nation’s biggest energy challenges.

Like the lawmakers, she noted the importance of subjects beyond federal R&D funding, such as science and math education, scientists’ and engineers’ working conditions and private investment.

Working with the caucus can also teach scientists and engineers how to communicate better with Congress, Williams said.

Feedback from the first caucus meeting revealed that “we might have gone a little over the heads of some of the staffers,” he said. “Our [IEEE] members aren’t used to dealing with Congress. Most congressional staffers don’t have a technology or engineering background. So it really is a symbiotic relationship where we both can benefit.”

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