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## **Evolution of Public Opinion on Nuclear Energy In the United States**

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Thank you for this opportunity to share some of what we have learned about public opinion toward nuclear energy in the U.S. One of the extraordinary features of nuclear energy conferences in my country this past year is that none of the speakers mention public opinion as an obstacle to new nuclear power plants. In fact, speaker after speaker cites public opinion as an enabler of new nuclear power plants. That's a big change from the past.

There are indeed favorable conditions for new nuclear power plants in the U.S. And one of these favorable conditions is the support of the American public. The American public's support for nuclear energy is at a record high.

In our remarks today, we would like to give you some highlights of the public support we have found in recent surveys and some of the dynamics of this support.

### **About the Research**

Let me take a minute to talk about the research base on public attitudes toward nuclear energy. The research base is robust. It includes 22 years of public opinion surveys for Nuclear Energy Institute (NEI). NEI is the nuclear industry's policy organization in Washington, DC. NEI has strong technical, government affairs, and communications programs focused on industry priorities. NEI also has sponsored continuous public opinion research to measure and understand public opinion.

NEI's sponsored surveys include literally hundreds of studies of public opinion on nuclear issues since 1983. Dr. Ann Bisconti, the principal author of this paper, has directed these studies.

I will show some data and trends from national surveys with samples of 1,000 nationally representative U.S. adults. These are telephone surveys. The margin of error for these surveys is plus or minus three percentage points. The most recent national survey of the general public was in May 2005.

Also, in August 2005, NEI sponsored the first national public opinion survey of nuclear power plant neighbors. Nuclear power plant neighbors were defined as people living within 10 miles of America's nuclear power plants. There are 103 nuclear power reactors at 64 nuclear power stations. Random samples of 18 adults were surveyed in the 10 mile radius around each of these 64 plant communities, for a total of 1,152 plant neighbors. The survey excluded electric company employees.

### **Public Support**

The good news is that support for nuclear energy among the American public is widespread and growing in strength. And, support for nuclear energy in the plant communities is even higher.

**General public.** Let's look first at the opinions of the general American public:

- 70% now favor the use of nuclear energy. This 70% milestone was reached this year for the first time in more than two decades. You can see the upward trend. Two decades ago, the public was about evenly divided. Now there is a large gap between those who favor and oppose the use of nuclear energy.
- Perhaps even more important is the fact that strong supporters now outweigh strong opponents by nearly three to one.
- All regions favor the use of nuclear energy.

**Nuclear power plant communities.** Now let's look in more detail at the opinions in nuclear power plant communities:

- 83% favor the use of nuclear energy.

- Attitudes toward the local nuclear power plant are even more favorable; 87% have a favorable impression of the nearest nuclear power plant.
- Only 3% have a very unfavorable impression of the local plant; compare that 3% with 60% who have a very favorable of their plant—that’s a 20-to-1 margin.
- Moreover, 76% of nuclear power plant neighbors would find it acceptable to add a new reactor at the nearest nuclear power plant site, if a new power plant were needed. That is important because the first wave of new reactors will probably be added to existing sites where there is space for them.
- About 80% would find a new reactor acceptable in the South and West and in low population density communities. These are averages, and so obviously these numbers are higher in some communities and lower in others. New reactors would be added in communities with high support.

### **Reasons for Support**

It’s quite obvious that most plant neighbors are saying “yes, in my backyard.”

Whatever happened to NIMBY? And what are the reasons for the record-high support among the general public?

There are several explanations:

**The first reason is safe performance.** Safe performance is the foundation for public support. Without safe performance, everything else is irrelevant. Nuclear power plant performance has been excellent in recent years. The industry recognized that the safest and most efficient plants are also the most economical. The nuclear generating companies, through NEI, studied and shared best practices for safety, efficiency, and good economical performance.

The improvements are remarkable and have resulted in capacity factors around 90% in recent years. Some plants also have been updated. The increased output from nuclear power plants since 1990 is the equivalent of adding 27 new nuclear power plants to the grid—that is 27 additional gigawatts (GW). That amount is enough to meet the electricity needs of an additional 16.8 million energy-hungry Americans each year.

**The second reason why support has grown is that the need for nuclear energy is becoming increasingly apparent to the American public.** Safe performance is

necessary but not sufficient. The public supports nuclear energy most when the public perceives that it is needed.

This country has experienced some wake-up calls in recent years:

- Electricity problems in California and elsewhere in 2001.
- A blackout of a major part of the U.S. in August 2003.
- Soaring gas prices both at the pump and in the home.
- Focused reporting on the impact of hurricanes on our energy supplies.
- Continuing conflict in the Middle East which highlights America's dependence on energy from unstable parts of the world.

These wake-up calls reminded Americans how much our quality of life depends on energy. When energy is on the agenda, support for nuclear grows. A context of need for energy is especially important in order for the public to support building more plants. It seems reasonable, doesn't it? If it's not needed, why build it?

**The third reason for growing support is increased public recognition of nuclear energy's benefits.** NEI launched a proactive communications campaign about nuclear energy's benefits. The campaign communicates the benefits that make nuclear energy an important part of the energy mix—especially clean air, reliability, and affordability. Public opinion research finds that clean air, reliability, and affordability are top public priorities for electricity production.

Here is an example of NEI advertising that communicates these benefits. Bisconti Research tested the advertising and found that it is very effective:

- 79% said they felt more favorable to nuclear energy after seeing this advertising. That's the highest we've seen in many years of ad testing.
- The advertising increases awareness of nuclear energy's benefits, especially clean air and ability to provide energy without greenhouse gas emissions.
- There is not one word about safety in the advertisement and yet the advertisement communicates safety because it is comforting and gives hope for the future.

One of the common features of public opinion in many countries is ambivalence. Many people have just two ideas about nuclear energy. On the one hand is the view of nuclear energy as the fuel of the future, and on the other hand is the view of nuclear energy as dangerous. Our research shows that new ideas about the benefits of nuclear

energy help to shift the balance so that greater weight is given to the positive side. In the U.S., the top new idea is that nuclear energy is emission-free, so with nuclear energy we can have both clean air and reliable energy.

For policymakers concerned about climate change, the ability to provide energy without CO2 emissions makes nuclear energy particularly attractive.

As I said, the NEI advertising communicated safety without mentioning safety, but NEI, the American Nuclear Society, and utilities do talk about safety directly--especially in brochures, Web sites, information centers, and conversations. Fears about nuclear energy result in large part from a sense that the risk is not controllable. The safety messages that reassure the U.S. public explain how the plants are made safe—that is, controlled.

These controls include:

- Regulatory oversight—a strong regulatory agency that inspects each plant daily and, if a plant is not operating safely, shuts it down until it is safe.
- Physical barriers such as multiple layers of protection and multiple back-up safety systems.
- And the people who work there—highly trained, federally certified, and residents of the community with their families.

**A fourth reason for growing public support is the positive attitude of the industry itself in recent years.** There was a time when no company CEO would dare talk about building more nuclear power plants. How that has changed! Industry leaders are engaged in steps toward building more plants and they are talking about it.

Already, 9 companies have notified the Nuclear Regulatory Commission that they plan to take one of the licensing steps toward a new reactor. Industry talk and action relating to new nuclear power plants has attracted the attention of public officials and the news media. The news media find the idea of a nuclear Renaissance intriguing.

- Positive stories about the nuclear Renaissance have appeared in major newspapers.
- They have also appeared in a wide variety of magazines.

- Even the popular magazine *Elle* was intrigued. A recent issue of *Elle*, with Jennifer Lopez on the cover, put nuclear energy on their list of 25 Cool Things for Fall 2005.

While investigating the reasons for interest in new plants, reporters learn that nuclear power plants are a valuable part of the energy mix due to their clean air benefits, reliability, and affordability.

**The fifth reason for support applies to nuclear power plant communities.** The very high level of support we find in nuclear power plant communities can be attributed in large part to familiarity. The plant is an important and visible part of the community. The operating companies and the people who work at the plant have established trust through good community relations, as well as safe and excellent performance.

### **In Conclusion**

We have high and growing public support both nationally and in nuclear power plant communities in the U.S. To some extent that is due to factors beyond the industry control—such as increased energy demand, concerns about air emissions and climate change, and worries about too much dependence on energy from unstable parts of the world.

But to a large extent that support has resulted from the actions of the industry itself: good safe performance, good communications, solid research to guide the way we communicate, and a more positive industry attitude. Above all, the industry has gained from unity: unity in working together to solve problems, developing a common vision for the future, and communicating proactively and positively about nuclear energy's future role.