

Mid-Year Report to the IEEE-USA Government Fellows Committee

Thomas T. Lee, Ph.D.

September 21, 2009

I began my Fellowship in the office of Congressman Jay Inslee in January 2009, and to say that my fellowship year has been “exciting” would be a tremendous understatement. I have been able to play a role in each of the three signature bills of the first session of the 111th Congress: the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (H.R. 1), the American Clean Energy and Security Act (H.R. 2454, a.k.a. the Waxman-Markey bill), and the America’s Affordable Health Choices Act (H.R. 3200). These bills continue to be major priorities for both Congressional leadership and the Obama Administration, and I consider myself very fortunate to have been able to contribute to them during my fellowship. This experience has allowed me to participate in and witness key elements of the legislative process that few people have had the opportunity to experience, and has given me a new appreciation for the inner workings of Congress.

My legislative portfolio includes energy, climate, agriculture, and science. I was also temporarily assigned to healthcare during July to assist in the effort to report H.R. 3200 from the Energy and Commerce committee before the August recess. Energy and climate are a strong focus for Congressman Inslee, and I am one of three members of his energy and climate team. It is rare for a House member who is not part of the leadership of a committee or sub-committee to have more than one staff member cover an issue. The fact that Rep. Inslee has an entire team covering this issue shows the importance he places on it. On this team, I specialize in biofuels and biomass energy, low-carbon fuels, forestry and agriculture, offsets, international climate issues, clean energy research, and adaptation to climate change.

My fellowship started quickly – within one week of my arrival, work began on the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. My mission was to help promote and maintain a high level of investment in clean energy research, development, and deployment. My work included consultations with leading energy scientists and policy experts, writing memos and letters to members of President Obama’s transition team and Administration, and discussions with other Congressional offices. I also participated in the Energy and Commerce markup of the bill. This work supported Rep. Inslee’s vision of using clean energy to create jobs and reinvigorate the economy. The final bill included close to \$10 billion in funding for this purpose.

Soon after passage of the Recovery Act, attention turned toward energy and climate change legislation. Rep. Inslee’s strong focus on these issues allowed me to play a significant role in crafting this legislation behind the scenes. I had meetings on a daily basis with a variety of stakeholders, including environmental groups, energy producers, businesses, and consumer groups. I also staffed the Congressman at

several hearings in the weeks leading up to introduction of the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES), as well as an entire weeklong series of hearings on the bill itself. My scientific training came in handy during this time, including one particularly satisfying instance when I helped Rep. Inslee identify manipulated and misleading scientific data included in testimony for a hearing. He was able to call out the witness and set the record straight.

The most eye-opening experience thus far in my fellowship came during the marathon 40-hour Energy and Commerce Committee markup of ACES just before Memorial Day. I was exposed to the legislative process, raw and unfiltered. Television coverage of proceedings such as these often focuses on the Members and events in the hearing room. However, it masks the hard work that Congressional staffers do every day before and during the session. While services such as CSPAN usually shows individual Members calmly presenting their ideas and arguments, in the staff areas behind the Members and in the anterooms to the hearing chamber are dozens of staffers busy preparing amendments, writing statements for their bosses, counting and/or courting votes, and even negotiating legislative language. The pace of activity and energy in the room are difficult to describe in words. I was personally responsible for three Inslee amendments, two of which were included as amendments in the bill reported by the Energy and Commerce Committee.

My exposure to the political process did not end there. Leading up to the Floor action in the House, I made a second attempt to include the amendment that was left out of the bill reported by Energy and Commerce by preparing a floor amendment. I was able to get strong support from key Members, but learned a hard lesson in politics when an influential Member whose opposition I had not anticipated blocked the amendment before it was able to reach the Floor. In addition to this effort, I participated in staff-level discussions of other provisions of importance to Washington state. I also contributed to the “whipping” process, giving information and technical assistance to offices in an effort to persuade them to vote for the bill. The fruit of this labor came on June 26 when the American Clean Energy and Security Act passed the House by a vote of 219-212.

After returning from the July 4th recess, I was assigned to work with our Legislative Assistant for healthcare to help staff the Energy and Commerce Committee markup for the healthcare reform bill. This assignment proved to be exciting and challenging. It was exciting because it was an issue of fundamental and immediate importance to many people, and it was challenging because health care is a complicated, multi-faceted issue, and I did not have the benefit of weeks of briefings and background research as I had for energy. This underscores the speed with which things can change in Congress, and the need for staff, including Fellows, to be intellectually nimble and able to educate themselves quickly on a multitude of issues.

During this time, I had the opportunity to staff the Congressman during a late-night negotiation session with other Members, which was a fascinating look at a little-

known aspect of how law is made. Far from the back-room dealing that often is portrayed negatively in the media, this was a vigorous, good faith negotiation. Beyond the eye of cameras and reporters, Members advocated ardently and passionately for the interests of their constituents. I left this session with a deeper appreciation for the legislative process, and a much greater respect for the Members in attendance. Now that H.R. 3200 has been reported out of the committee, I will be turning my attention back to energy, but this brief foray into healthcare was a valuable part of my experience on Capitol Hill.

For the remainder of my Fellowship, I expect my role in the Inslee office to grow. Although the ACES bill has passed the House, there is still significant work to be done in energy and climate. Because of Rep. Inslee's leading role in the ACES bill, our office has been called on for technical assistance and to provide political insight to several Senate offices. There are also multiple pieces of energy legislation that were not included in the ACES bill that Rep. Inslee would still like to see advance in the House, and I will be responsible for several of these. Additionally, one of Rep. Inslee's energy staffers has recently left the office, and I will be taking on part of his portfolio for the time being, including key provisions in ACES. The end of my Fellowship promises to be as fulfilling as the start, and I look forward to the months ahead.