

Statement of Robert M. Simon
Nominee
Associate Director, Environment and Energy
Office of Science and Technology Policy

Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate
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Chairman Rockefeller, Ranking Member Thune, and members of the Committee, I am pleased to be here today as President Obama's nominee to be the Associate Director for Environment and Energy at the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). I am deeply honored by the President's decision to propose me for this position. If confirmed by the Senate, I will look forward to assisting Dr. John Holdren, the President's science and technology advisor, and working with other members of the staff in the Executive Office of the President, as well as with the Congress.

I would not be here today, but for the help, support, and guidance of many mentors, colleagues, members of my family, and friends.

I had the good fortune to have two engineers as parents. Not many people my age can boast of having an engineer for a mother. My mother, in fact, was the first woman to graduate with a chemical engineering degree from the night school at Drexel Institute of Technology in Philadelphia in the early 1950s. Training for engineering as a woman back then was not easy – growing up, I heard stories from time to time of professors who were less than helpful to female students studying engineering. One response to those challenges was the decision by my mother and her friends to start the Society of Women Engineers at Drexel in 1949. More than six decades later, the Society has more than 20,000 members representing all areas of engineering and many areas of technology. The Society encourages girls, starting as early as elementary school, to aspire to be engineers. It maintains the crucial networks of support and mentoring so necessary to any effort to broaden participation by women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or STEM, careers.

My late father was also a source of inspiration—with the optimistic, can-do nature most good engineers demonstrate in the face of challenges, as well as a keen appreciation that sometimes solutions can be over-engineered. One of his humorous observations, which I found, during my time in the Senate, often applied to legislation as well, was that “if you keep improving something long enough, eventually it will break.”

I went to a high school with an excellent science program. While I was there in the early 1970s, I led a number of students who worked with the faculty to develop an outdoor environmental education unit for middle-school students. In college and graduate school, I trained in chemistry, a core scientific discipline for environmental and energy issues. My first professional career experiences in Washington were at the National Research Council of the National Academies of Sciences and Engineering, where I directed the process of developing technical consensus around science, engineering, and energy policy issues.

When I went to the Department of Energy in 1989, I had the good fortune to work directly for the Secretary of Energy, Admiral James D. Watkins. In that capacity, I was also able to see how technical information was used in the formulation and execution of energy and environmental policy. After successfully establishing the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board and directing its first set of studies, I was promoted into a more responsible position in the senior line management of the Office of Energy Research. There I learned more about scientific program management and the organizational and budgetary challenges that must be met in order to successfully manage programs and projects.

In June 1993, the Chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Sen. J. Bennett Johnston, requested that I be detailed to the committee as a science expert. For the next 20 years, I served at the interface of science, engineering, and public policy in a number of positions in the Senate. These included serving on the staff of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources under Chairman Johnston; a stint in Senator Jeff Bingaman's personal office; a year on the staff of the Joint Economic Committee; and, finally, 14 years as the Democratic Staff Director of the Energy Committee. Together these positions gave me a strong understanding of how public policy in energy and environmental areas can be successfully crafted, on a bipartisan basis, through legislation. I had the good fortune of working for two Members who exemplified substantive, constructive, and bipartisan approaches to important policy issues. I also spent about half of my time in the Senate in the majority and the other half in the minority, so I gained a good appreciation of how the policy process looks from both vantage points.

Should the Senate confirm me for the OSTP Associate Director position, I would welcome the opportunity to apply what I have learned over the course of my career to carry out the duties of a position that is entrusted with the development and reasoned application of scientific and technical information to the public policy process at its highest level in the Executive Branch.

My career has been motivated from the beginning by an interest in public service. I hope to be able to continue helping formulate sensible approaches to crucial national and international challenges in the areas of energy and the environment. While the prospect of addressing these complex challenges in a manner that develops long-term social and political consensus is daunting, I cannot think of a more important set of issues to which I could make a substantive contribution.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on my nomination this morning. I appreciate the consideration that you will give to it and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.