Even uncommon voices can find common ground on energy efficiency

BY ROSS EISENBERG AND KIT KENNEDY - 04/14/16 02:05 PM EDT

Washington, D.C., has earned a reputation in recent years as a city plagued by hyper-partisan gridlock. Yet our two organizations—which often disagree—have found common ground on energy efficiency. It’s instructive to look at why both the National Association of Manufacturers and the Natural Resources Defense Council both support it.

It’s simple, really: by building better buildings, making more innovative products, and using creative manufacturing processes, we can accomplish multiple goals—reducing wasted resources, improving our electricity system, preventing more toxic pollution, reducing climate change, and fueling economic growth. Many new, innovative energy efficiency products and technologies are made right here by American manufacturers, creating jobs and economic growth across the nation.

Candidates aren’t banging their fists on the lectern about energy efficiency. There are no big-budget commercials or fiery debates on TV. But that’s not because the issue isn’t important. Buildings consume approximately 40 percent of all the energy used in the United States. Improving energy efficiency of our buildings, and of the appliances and equipment inside them, is one of the easiest and cheapest ways to improve the environment, save money, combat global climate change, and stoke our economy.

This week the U.S. Senate continues debating a broad energy bill. It’s been nearly a decade since comprehensive energy policy was enacted. We disagree about some elements of the NAM-supported bill, but we do agree on much of the energy efficiency policy.

We both support provisions in the bill that would help states adopt better building codes, assist small and medium-sized manufacturers with energy efficiency measures, and redouble existing efforts to develop new technologies at national labs and elsewhere.

NAM and NRDC have long supported the SAVE (Sensible Accounting to Value Energy) Act, introduced as an amendment to the bill, which would allow homeowners use mortgage financing to make their homes more energy efficient. We support financing programs operated by many cities and states (called Property Assessed Clean Energy, or “PACE”) that allow homeowners to pay for efficiency improvements through an assessment on their property tax bill.

We support the federal government, America’s largest building owner, using performance contracting to invest in upgraded federal buildings to make them more energy and water efficient. Together, Presidents Obama and Bush committed to over $6 billion to these projects, but there are a lot more federal buildings in need of upgrades.

Energy efficiency can help drive innovation. When America’s industrial facilities invest to improve energy efficiency—such as through onsite generation, combined heat and power technologies, waste heat recovery systems, water reuse and recycling, high-efficiency motor systems, and demand response—they help commercialize these innovations, which makes it easier for others to follow.

Similarly, reasonable standards for appliances can contribute to innovative product advances. A good example is today’s typical new refrigerator, which uses one-quarter the energy than a similar model in 1973, while offering 20% more capacity and being available at half the...
Even uncommon voices can find common ground on energy efficiency. A lot of great work on energy efficiency occurs in states, where utilities invest billions of dollars year after year to help upgrade America's homes and buildings and to help businesses and manufacturers operate more efficiently.

Federal action has contributed to significant energy savings for consumers and businesses. Our organizations don't agree on everything, but we do agree that energy efficiency should be a priority for Congress, the administration, and states. NAM and NRDC will continue to try to find common ground on such sensible policies.

Eisenberg is the Vice President of Energy and Resources Policy with the National Association of Manufacturers. Kennedy is the Director Energy & Transportation Program with the Natural Resources Defense Council.