

Jim Greenwood

A fervent supporter of embryonic stem cell research and a dogged opponent of corporate wrongdoers, US congressman Jim Greenwood is stepping out of politics to head biotech's biggest industry organization.

You can hear it in his voice. Jim Greenwood is feeling pretty good about life these days. Little wonder. The congressman from Pennsylvania will be retiring at the end of this year after 24 long years in politics. What's more, he won't have to go looking for a new job. Come January, he will assume an \$800,000-a-year job as president of one of the few trade groups in Washington that is actually held in relatively high regard—the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO).

Mindful that he's being judged with a long measuring stick by some in the industry who were pushing for somebody who, at least on paper, better matched the bona fides of the outgoing president of 13 years, Carl Feldbaum, Greenwood describes himself as “moderately intelligent, very curious,” with an ability to adjust quickly: “What I don't know, I'll figure out in a hurry—I brief well.”

It remains to be seen whether Greenwood was the best choice to take over Feldbaum's role as biotech industry's top lobbyist and advocate. But given the unfortunate timing of Feldbaum's retirement—just months before elections in America that could easily tilt the balance of power in Washington—BIO could have done worse than Greenwood. He's a man for all seasons, and by all accounts, affable and accomplished.

His political credentials could prove useful in the future, as a moderate, reform-minded Republican, he really is a compassionate conservative. He is a former social worker who has fought hard in Congress for children's and women's health; that just might give him credibility with the general public not only in the United States but also in places like Canada and Europe, which have, in the past, been distrustful of US biotech's aims. The GM crop kerfuffle proved that European public opinion is a tricky trade issue.

When it comes to credibility in the medical community and drug industry, despite taking a tough stand against big business (including big pharma), Greenwood has done more to help doctors (by pressing for medical liability limits) and drug companies (by ensuring that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), in Rockville, MD, and Medicare will become more accommodating) than he has done to handicap them. His testimony and voting record suggest that he is more friend than foe to industry and the scientific establishment.

He even went against his president to aid entrepreneurs and scientists by introducing in early 2003 the compromise bill (later defeated) that would have cleared the way for vastly expanded federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. “He earned a lot of respect from a lot of powerful people by doing that,” says Dan Perry, president of the Coalition for the Advancement of Medical Research, an influential network in Washington whose members include the American Medical Association and universities like Harvard and Stanford, which are both launching their own stem cell research centers.

“Moving over to BIO will be a natural transition for Jim,” says Scott Klug, a former House colleague who is now head of public affairs at the Washington law firm, Foley & Lardner. In other words, “he's not switching positions” as much as it seems. Indeed, Greenwood dismisses any notion that he is compromising his principles. He says his new post “is just a new way to fulfill [his] lifelong commitment to improving health care.”

The tacit expectation at BIO is that Greenwood can open doors on both sides of the political aisle. Although he would not say how he aims to do that, his top priorities will be stemming the tide of prescription drug re-importation, re-authorization of Prescription Drug User Fee Act, approval of follow-on biologics, Medicare reform implementation, easing restrictions on stem cell research, and Medicare reimbursement. Biotech dearly needs all the access it can get right now.

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Greenwood has access, but does he have influence where it counts? In the Senate? In the White House? “Many of my best friends are in the Senate,” he says in response to assertions from those who call him a “low-volt” figure in Washington. Some of his former House colleagues, however, say that Greenwood might have fewer friends than he thinks: “He can be very difficult to work with ... there's a lot of bluster. That tactic can serve him well as head of a subcommittee, but I doubt he will be able to use it and get the same results at BIO.”

Big challenges, big shoes, indeed.

From his perch as chairman of the House Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, whose remit includes investigating Wall Street and corporate evildoers like Enron and Tyco, Greenwood could demand access and bring back results because the balance of power tilted in his direction. When he wanted access and answers at the US National Institutes of Health, in Bethesda, MD, earlier this spring to get to the bottom of conflict-of-interest allegations, he got speedy results because he held the power. And he could lean on Medicare and the FDA to reform their ways because the White House and the Republican majority in the House backed him.

When he crosses over to the other side, to take up his new post at BIO this January, it will be Greenwood who will be at the mercy of Congress, the NIH, the FDA, Medicare and Wall Street. He will need more than briefs and bluster to make it in Washington.

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