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An Interview With 2025–2026 AIST President

Al C. Behr

By Heather N. Smith

Al Behr began his career in 1996 as a design engineer at Nucor Building Systems in Waterloo, Ind., USA. In 1999, he joined the start-up of Nucor Building Systems in Terrell, Texas, and then moved to Nucor Building Systems in Swansea, S.C., in 2001. During those engagements, he worked within the technical portion of the business. In 2008, Behr was promoted to general manager of Nucor Building Systems – South Carolina. In 2011, he joined Nucor's Vulcraft/Verco Group as general manager of Vulcraft in Florence, S.C., and was elected a vice president of Nucor in 2012. In 2014, he was promoted to president of the Vulcraft/Verco Group based out of Nucor's headquarters. In 2017, he joined Nucor Steel–Texas as vice president and general manager. In May 2020, he returned to Nucor's headquarters as executive vice president of plate and structural products and in May 2024 became executive vice president of raw materials. Behr is a graduate of Purdue University with a B.S. degree in civil engineering.

Tell me about your background. How did you get started in the steel industry?

I started with Nucor right out of college, working as a structural engineer for Nucor Building Systems in Waterloo, Ind., USA. For the next 20 years, I moved around in various positions within Nucor Buildings Group and then eventually ended up working in our Vulcraft joist and deck business. It wasn't until 2017 that I joined the steelmaking side of Nucor's business, when I was asked to lead our Nucor Steel–Texas team in Jewett, Texas.

Reflecting on my time at Nucor, I've had the chance to experience multiple "starts" in the steel industry. I've moved across Nucor's diverse portfolio, from our downstream products that use Nucor's steel to our steelmaking division at Nucor Steel–Texas. Now, I'm leading our Raw Materials team. Each role has allowed me to lead teams from different perspectives within the industry, each with its own unique opportunities and challenges that make our industry so dynamic.

Did you have a mentor or somebody in your career who served as a role model? What did you learn from them?

Yes! I've had many mentors and role models — too many to mention by name. In my early career, there were senior engineers that seemed to know everything about pre-engineered building design. There were also senior detailers that had the patience to answer my incessant questions about how all the pieces fit together. These teammates helped me develop a foundational knowledge that would serve me well for many years.

As my career progressed, I turned to mentors that had a stronger leadership focus. They helped me balance the key components of leadership, such as setting expectations, providing tools and feedback, coaching, and holding myself accountable.

Looking back, I don't think I realized just how formative those early relationships would be. As a young teammate just starting out in the "real world," I just looked at it as getting help. Help with technical questions … helping with leading others … just help. But if I knew then what I know now, I would have been a lot more intentional about absorbing how those mentors made decisions. That, to me, is the key focus in mentoring — decision-making.

What has your experience been like serving on the AIST Executive Committee? Why did you decide to serve?

It's been an honor and a tremendous learning experience to serve AIST. I have really enjoyed meeting other leaders in the industry and learning about all the ways AIST supports it.

My decision to serve was easy. AIST is making a difference in the industry. It's improving safety, sustainability, competitiveness and much else. I think we all want to make a difference in some way, and I'm honored to contribute in some small way to the difference that AIST is making.

I first joined the Executive Committee in 2019. Soon after, we were facing a global pandemic that brought tremendous uncertainty to our industry, including AIST itself. This uncertainty then transferred into the homes of families that depend on the steel industry for their livelihood. It was reassuring to see that AIST was healthy, well-managed and had the wherewithal to continue to support the industry at such a critical time.

Of course, this didn't happen by accident. The organization is extremely well run, and watching Ron Ashburn and the AIST team perform has been a privilege. When people are really good at something, it's fun to watch them perform. This might be golf … stand-up comedy … playing quarterback … or running AIST!

What do you plan to focus on during your term as AIST president?

It's an interesting time for the steel industry. Global dynamics are ever-changing and domestic industrial policy is adjusting to keep pace. I think it's important that our industry has a voice in the shaping of industrial policy and AIST provides a forum for us to find commonality on the issues that we face together. Some of these issues include fair trade, decarbonization and dealing with global overproduction.

We also need to keep attracting the brightest young minds to join our industry. There are a lot of misconceptions about the steel industry, and we need to continue to tell our story about the reality. The steel industry in the U.S. is modern, efficient, and on the forefront of technological advancements. As young adults enter the workforce, this is the type of environment that many are looking for. But they only know the story that we tell them — and we haven't always been intentional about telling our story. While we've come a long way in the past few years, I think AIST can play a key role in educating tomorrow's workforce about the possibilities that await in our industry.

Nucor has a handful of projects in the works: a sheet mill in West Virginia, modernizing and expanding the Steckel mill in Tuscaloosa, Ala., and planning to add another micro-mill in the Pacific Northwest, to name a few. How does investing in these projects and the steel industry workers behind them invigorate the North American market?

The U.S. is home to the most advanced and healthiest steel industry anywhere on the globe. Our leadership position is the result of continued investment by American steelmakers to improve efficiency and deploy the latest technology, in contrast to many of our competitors overseas. Nucor is currently executing a long-term growth plan that will take nearly a decade to complete. We are about two-thirds of the way through this journey in terms of capital deployment — having reinvested approximately US$16 billion back into our business through capital expenditures and acquisitions over the last five years. Each investment we are making is aligned with our broader strategy to increase Nucor's product mix toward higher-margin, value-added products that address specific customer needs in key markets. These investments are aligned with steel-intensive megatrends that are driving demand for steel. We identify these megatrends as Rebuilding, Repowering and Reshoring: rebuilding our infrastructure, growing our domestic energy production and reshoring manufacturing back to the U.S.

Diversifying our product mix and moving up the value chain helps us stay ahead of our competition, both domestically and internationally. These investments are creating new jobs and new opportunities for our existing teammates, while providing high-paying manufacturing jobs in communities across the country.

Nucor is arguably one of the cleanest steel producers in the world, with a goal of reducing emissions by 2030 for its hot-rolled steel production. What steps is your company taking to reach its decarbonization goals?

We are taking a multifaceted approach to achieve our greenhouse gas emission intensity targets. Abundant carbon-free energy is essential to our decarbonization goals. With the increased need for energy coming from the growth in data centers and reshoring manufacturing, we cannot pit one energy source against another. We are going to need all of it. That is why we have invested in small modular nuclear reactor technology and the development of nuclear fusion, along with investments in wind and solar. On the raw materials side, we have invested in a startup company, Electra, that is developing carbon-free iron units. Carbon-free sources of iron is a major challenge to achieving decarbonization goals as an industry. We are also investing in technology that will allow us to increase our utilization of obsolete scrap and decrease our use of pig iron. One of the most significant projects to reduce carbon emissions from our raw materials is carbon capture and storage. We have a partnership with ExxonMobil to capture carbon dioxide at our direct reduced iron (DRI) plant in Louisiana and transport it to a storage facility in the state. The project will capture between 600,000 and 800,000 tons of CO_2 each year

and result in DRI that has a carbon footprint that is 80% lower than pig iron.

How has the industry changed throughout your career?

One of the biggest changes I have seen in my career is the strong emphasis today on safety that has drastically reduced injuries in our industry. The Nucor team has set a record for safety performance for six years in a row. Last year, we achieved our lowest injury and illness rate in company history. We have done this during a time of tremendous growth with multiple large construction projects and bringing new teammates onboard. This focus on safety is the most positive development I have seen during my career.

Today, there is an even stronger emphasis on sustainability. The domestic steel industry is already among the cleanest in the world, and we have been undergoing a decades-long transition to cleaner production methods, such as electric arc furnace steelmaking. Importantly, this shift began well before sustainability became a mainstream priority. Thanks to these early investments, we are now well-positioned to meet the growing demand for low-carbon steel products. As a result, we are far ahead of many foreign competitors who continue to rely primarily on traditional blast furnace production. Finally, the industry is much more global today. During my time in the industry, we have seen significant consolidation in the U.S. that has resulted in an industry that is much stronger financially, more efficient and cleaner. But we also face more direct competition with foreign steelmakers and are impacted by unfair trade practices and production overcapacity in regions such as Asia. Production overcapacity and unfair trade practices are the greatest threat to U.S. steel producers, which is why we are glad to see the Trump administration taking decisive steps to stop unfair trade.

AIST is always looking to inspire the next generation of steelmakers. What would you say to a young professional considering a career in steel and joining AIST?

I would tell them that steel is an exciting and constantly changing industry. Steel is one of the most critical materials on the earth. It is the building block of modern societies, used in construction, industry and national defense. We have a bright future. Advances in technology are helping us to make steel that is lighter and stronger, which opens up all kinds of opportunities to develop creative solutions for our customers in key market segments, such as automotive and nonresidential construction.

If a young professional is looking to be challenged and wants to grow in their career, steel is a great industry for them. It is also why they should join AIST. Being a member gives you access to continuing education and learning about the latest trends in our industry. You get to meet people and grow your network of industry peers. I believe participating in AIST is an important way for young professionals to help shape the future direction of our industry. ✦