AISTech® 2026

Steel 2026: "Drafting" Our Future

A Recap of the Town Hall Forum

By Amanda Woods

The AISTech Town Hall Forum brings together top steel industry executives to share critical initiatives at their companies and discuss how their companies are tackling challenges facing the industry.

Returning for his 17th year as moderator, retired money and politics editor for KDKA-TV Pittsburgh Jon Delano opened the event noting a key difference in this year's lineup of panelists: "They're all finance guys."

Participating in the Town Hall Forum this year were: **Paul Lawrence,** senior vice president and chief financial officer, CMC; **Kevin Lewis,** executive vice president (EVP), chief financial officer (CFO) and head of Tubular Solutions, United States Steel Corporation; **Douglas Matthews**, president and chief executive officer, Orion Steel; **Jack Sullivan,** CFO, treasurer and EVP, Nucor Corp.; and **Kristopher Westbrooks,** president and chief operating officer, Metallus.

The Forum opened with a scrolling list of North American Steel Investments from 2021-2026 totaling some 50 projects and representing US$49.9 billion in private investment.

With this pretext, the questions set before the participants broadly dealt with who's investing in the steel industry and why; what the new generation of steel industry leaders is going to look like; and how steel producers are shoring up their balance sheets in the midst of economic and geopolitical uncertainty.

The panelists first dove into a discussion of steel markets: who's buying steel today, and what do the next 12 months look like?

For Nucor Corp., which has undergone a period of project ramp-ups, Jack Sullivan said the company sees steel shipment growth "north of 5%, maybe upwards of close 10% compared to 2025 ... that should be a good indicator that we see very healthy demand outlook."

That sequential growth, Sullivan said, includes domestic producers starting to fill the void from lower imports and the demand outlook in key sectors such as nonresidential construction. Data centers, chip facilities, energy and infrastructure all fall under the umbrella of nonresidential construction, which makes up about 55% of Nucor's order book, according to Sullivan.

CMC, too, is seeing good demand for infrastructure, its largest end market. Paul Lawrence said the company, which serves the early-stage construction market, is seeing “tremendous growth opportunity both in the infrastructure space and energy.”

Doug Matthews of Orion Steel shared his perspective on critical transportation infrastructure. Orion’s Rocky Mountain Steel facility, he said, supports replacement and expansion of freight-moving rail, as well as commuter rail. “Freight trains are going to be a critical part of moving products around the U.S. ... but commuter rail is something you’re starting to see.”

Metallus’ base business of automotive and oil and gas are remaining fairly steady, Kris Westbrooks said, “but where we see growth, beyond the base GDP growth, is in aerospace and defense. We make product that goes into munitions, and we’re seeing a significant pull from the government on spending from a defense budget perspective.”

Westbrooks noted that about 40% of seamless mechanical tubes in the U.S. are imported. “That’s a big opportunity for us to grow.”

One area that stands out for U. S. Steel is electrical steels, Kevin Lewis said. The company’s Big River Steel Works is in the process of commissioning and ramping up its nongrain-oriented electrical steel (NGOES) line.

“We’re continuing to look at the electrical steel market and see the opportunity for long-term demand growth there,” Lewis said.

In addition, the company recently announced the restart of its Gary tin facility. Automotive and advanced high-strength steels also continue to be a “growth driver for steel demand in the near and long term,” Lewis added.

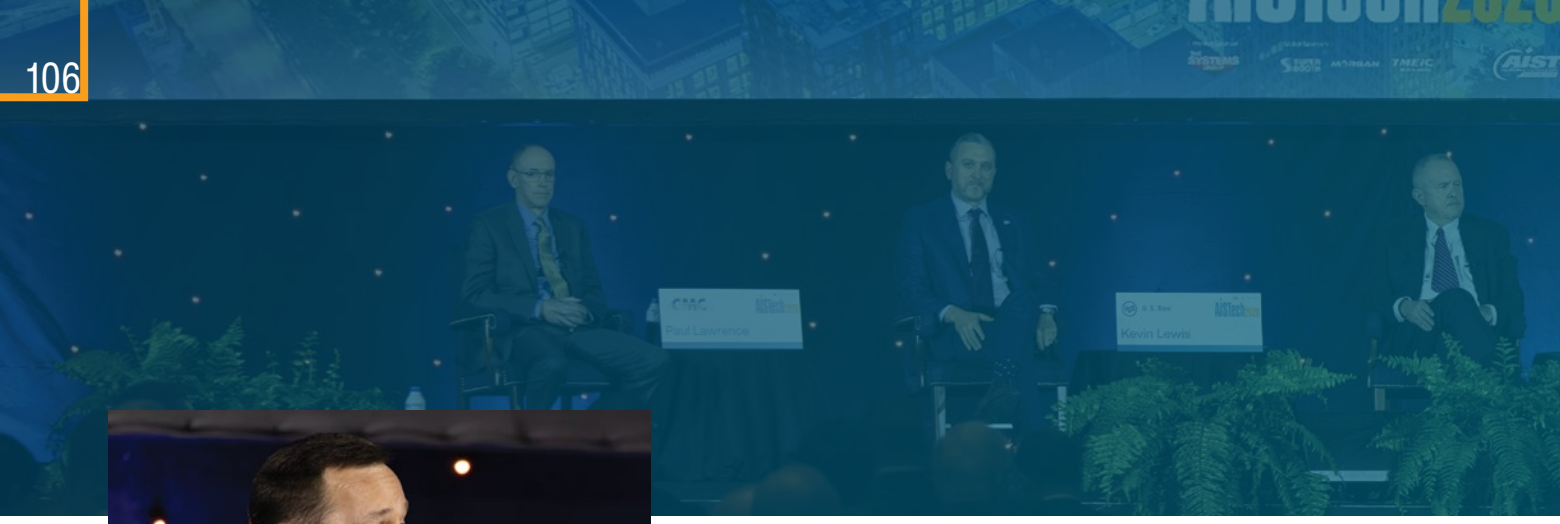
Turning the discussion to trade, Delano asked the panelists: “Is the current trade policy achieving the desired outcomes? What changes, if any, could better balance fair trade?”

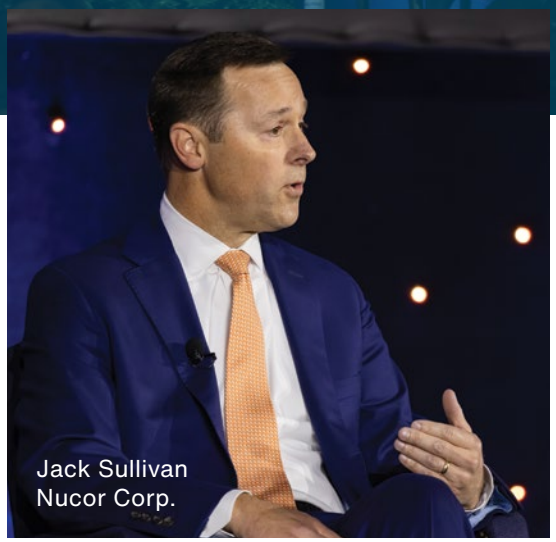
While the panelists agreed that the current trade policies, including the Section 232 tariffs, are effective, the length of time to determine injury is too long.

Paul Lawrence of CMC said, “What we need to do is modernize those trade rules ... The circumvention that takes place, the transgression of material around the world, needs to be more efficiently handled.” Lawrence cited an example of a recent trade case CMC filed that has taken 4 years to settle.

“It’s a burden on the industry, the length of time required for trade cases to be brought and to get to a determination,” Doug Matthews said. “The same is true in Canada ... The length of time businesses have to endure these tariffs coming in and the impact it has, not only on the financial balance sheet of the business but on our employees — reduced operations, layoffs — it’s injurious, and it would be helpful to streamline that process.”

More policies that prioritize American-made steel would help to address this, Jack Sullivan of Nucor said.




Jack Sullivan
Nucor Corp.


Kris Westbrooks
Metallus


Kevin Lewis
U. S. Steel

Delano asked if the U.S. is doing enough to stop what he called “back-door” steel coming in from its trading partners.

Sullivan responded, “It’s in the numbers: First quarter of 2026, we saw import levels of finished steel down 35% from the first quarter of 2025, so I do think that’s good evidence that the combination of Section 232 and individual trade cases with enforcement — more timely enforcement, is starting to help.”

“But with respect to back-door channels, that speaks to these upcoming negotiations with USMCA,” Sullivan said. “I think the best outcome of that is going to be this administration feeling more confident that those back-door channels are getting sealed off.”

At the intersection of politics, trade and resources is the war in Iran. Delano cited the Associated General Contractors’ largest one-month increase in materials and services in four years due to the record jump in diesel fuel because of the war.

He asked the panelists: Do you anticipate the war in Iran having an impact on steel?

“There’s clear recognition that our stockpiles of defense weapons are too low, and the Iran war is an example that’s exacerbated that,” Kris Westbrooks of Metallus said. “The pace at which companies are investing right now is significant. We’re seeing a lot of new entrants into this space that we’re working with, including the legacy OEMs. You’re going to continue to see for years to come a rebuild.”

“It’s important for us to support them and make the steel that’s necessary to keep us safe,” he added.

Kevin Lewis of U. S. Steel noted, "I think much of what we're seeing in Iran is geopolitical risk and we talked about trade policy, ensuring we have a strong domestic American steel industry — it's reinforced by this geopolitical uncertainty we see, so the stronger we can make our industrial base, the stronger and more resilient our trade policies are, the less vulnerable we are to some of these geopolitical conflicts around the world."

Delano then steered the discussion into investments the panelists' companies have made, which total in the billions — and have those investments started realizing returns.

At Nucor, Sullivan said, "we've been in a pretty heavy period of investment. When we think about returns on investment, we think about measuring those more in terms of decades, not quarters or initial years, because that capital deployment process takes some time, but we're on the leading edge of incremental returns from those investments."

For his company, Lewis said, "U. S. Steel has been on an investment journey over the past couple of years to build out the mini-mill segment, starting with the acquisition of Big River Steel in 2019, with full ownership in 2021, and then the doubling of production capability at Big River immediately following some of the strongest financial years in our company's history. We've also been making investments downstream."

"We are seeing the returns on those investments, and what's exciting is that those returns not only justify the investments we have made, but they're going to support what is an unprecedented level of reinvestment in our business moving forward," Lewis added. "We have a US$10.8 billion investment commitment that we will execute by 2028, and US$14 billion in total."

Just recently the company announced the investment of a nearly US$2 billion DRI facility to be co-located at its Big River campus, allowing U. S. Steel to vertically integrate its mini-mill business.

Metallus, Westbrooks said, takes "a calculated view on investments, and our company is definitely smaller than all these companies up here, so every decision we make is critical to our overall business and balance sheet."

"So we focus primarily on automation and robotics over the past few years. These are smaller investments with solid returns that you can realize fairly quickly. We did, though, enter into a contract with the U.S. Army about a year ago. We received about US$100 million of investments to put new assets into our facility to support the defense industry."

"It supports not only the U.S. Army but it also supports our other end markets as well," Westbrooks added.

Regarding his company's Rocky Mountain Steel rail mill project, Doug Matthews said, "When things get really tough, capital allocations is one you tend to pull back on. The wherewithal and the resolve to find the capital to continue on with the new rail mill — I applaud the team for keeping that moving through. It could've been easy to shut that project down, but as we sit here in the second quarter of 2026 on the cusp of commercial

production and seeing the market demand for the products that we're making — we're really excited about the prospects of that investment."

"We're focused on quick return on investment, quick impact, and empowering the employees to make decisions and give them the resources to be able to make the improvements they've identified, and that will continue to be our push for the foreseeable future," Matthews added.

Delano then asked the panelists how the investment community is viewing the steel industry these days.

Sullivan said, "I think the steel sector appeals to investors who are seeking to get exposure to our broader economy — nonresidential construction, the steel-intensive megatrends like reshoring, rebuilding and repowering of the American economy."

"Steel represents the building blocks of the American economy," Sullivan continued, "but I think investors coming into the steel sector have to recognize that this is a cyclical sector, so they tend to bank on companies and management teams that have a proven track record of navigating those cycles and coming out stronger on the other side."

Paul Lawrence countered, "I think the industry today operates a little differently in terms of all these investments that we're making really provide a cost structure that's variable in nature. Today it very much is a value over volume scenario."

"I think today investors see us as much more a very tangible return-oriented business, and it's not around capacity, it's not around just volumes of steel, it's around how you can maximize margin. We're seeing capital come into the steel industry like never before, and it's because of the fundamentals that we're demonstrating as leaders of those companies," Lawrence said. "So you're seeing more interest in investing in steel than, say, five years ago. No question."

On the topic of opportunities for steel, top of mind today is the construction of data centers. Delano asked the panelists how they


Doug Matthews
Orion Steel


Paul Lawrence
CMC

view the emerging data center sector and its implications for the steel industry, decarbonization or electrical usage.

Nucor, Jack Sullivan noted, has for years been preparing for the scenario we see today.

"We purchased, several years ago, a data product business that is specifically focused on the internal data center infrastructure, all of the different servers and racks that help cool and store the servers, and a lot of other components. And then we started repositioning and repurposing some of our older downstream businesses to make space, to start growing into that market." In addition, Nucor made a "bite-size acquisition in a utility towers business, which we've then committed another US$750 million to building multiple highly automated towers and structures facilities."

Lawrence brought up data centers' "firm load requirement on the utilities." He argued that while an electric arc furnace–based steel producer adjusts its power requirement in hot summer months, the same cannot be said for a data center.

"A grid has a choice."

"And so," he said, "that really comes to the need for power generation that supports firm power load requirements. And that's not wind, it's not solar, it's not batteries. It needs to be something nuclear, and I think, ultimately, what we need is the regulatory environment to speed

up dramatically, to get the energy infrastructure that we need being constructed here."

Another concern, Westbrooks said, is getting the trades excited to come and work in a steel mill.

"The welders, the electricians, they're getting sucked up to go support these data center projects that are paying higher rates with better working conditions, better hours. So it's been a challenge to get the quality of trades to come out into the steel industry."

The discussion then turned to artificial intelligence. Delano asked the panelists how their companies are utilizing AI and how it has enhanced their ability to make strategic decisions.

CMC, Lawrence said, is using AI to analyze its scrap mix to ensure quality while lowering costs, and U. S. Steel, according to Lewis, has turned to AI to enhance worker safety.

"We found opportunities to use camera systems to enhance the safeties of our workers," Lewis said. "We're prioritizing the deployment of AI across our business. I think, from the top down in organization, we're firm believers that if you're not leading in AI, you're going to be left behind, no matter what industry you operate in."

"AI is alive and well, especially at this conference," Sullivan said. "So if we want to get more efficient and more competitive as an industry, we've got to harness AI to automate certain functions, and we're seeing that on full display on a lot of our recently new construction projects."

"But, of course, that'll raise the whole issue of replacing humans," he continued. "It does, but if you're focused on the tasks that are most repetitive, the tasks that are not really viewed by the teammates as high-quality use of their time and energy, then you've sort of got a win-win there."

The final question of the day focused on the next generation of steelmakers, particularly Gen Z. Delano asked the panelists how their companies attract workers in the midst of outdated perceptions of the steel industry.

"Steel is the engine of America," Westbrooks said. "I think that gets people excited right off the bat. It's in everything we see and do every single day. The dynamic nature of the industry, the automation, the robotics, that gets people involved, but also the opportunity to grow your career in a variety of ways. So I think there's lots of excitement out there for the industry right now."

Jack Sullivan echoed the sentiment that the very nature of the industry itself is a selling point.

"We really just need to open the gates and show people what's on the inside, and I think they'd be really impressed when they see, especially this new wave of modern steelmaking, it involves very

sophisticated data-driven equipment that require young teammates to be responsible for some pretty complex solutions," Sullivan said.

"Internships and co-ops are really important," Matthews said. "Getting those folks to spend time working in our facilities, getting to know our facilities, they become advocates for your business when they go back to school."

Kevin Lewis shared, "Personally, I've been blessed to work at U. S. Steel since I joined as an intern, which is a critical way to attract and develop talent for the long term. I was drawn to the industry because my grandfathers worked in an industrial company, and that was something that I always wanted to be part of my professional journey."

"When it comes to attracting talent to U. S. Steel, it really is about raising awareness ... And then once you're able to engage with students or new professionals to the company, it's about telling them the story of what's on the horizon ... Once you start to connect the dots for students, I think there's really a great interest, not only in our business, but in the industry more broadly, and we want to continue to invest in universities and communities so our presence is felt."

For CMC's part, Paul Lawrence said, "We talk about perception. We've talked about attracting people, but I think there's also a focus area that we're doing internally, which is around career mapping, which is different from how we came through the industry. Being very explicit around what the opportunities are for people, and ensuring they're continuing to see, and can anticipate, growth in their careers. The great thing is in our industry, we're lean on people. I would say all of us up here, and probably all of you in your respective companies, people are not abundant. And so it's creating opportunities for people to succeed and stretch opportunities and really seeing and giving people opportunity to grow in their career with their respective companies." ✦

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