

The New York Times

MARCH 22, 2010

Senate Climate Bill Compromises Frighten, Infuriate Some Enviro Groups

By DARREN SAMUELSON
of Greenwire

Environmentalists began 2009 optimistic about prospects for swift passage of legislation mandating U.S. reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

With President Obama in the White House and Democrats in firm control of Capitol Hill, many saw a strong lineup focused on taking action to curb global warming.

But after the House passed a sweeping climate bill last June, the effort stalled in the Senate. And now environmentalists are being asked to agree to painful compromises that senators say are needed to get something -- anything, really -- across the finish line.

"We're not sure what we're getting now," said Erich Pica, president of Friends of the Earth U.S.

Jacqueline Savitz, senior campaign director for the marine conservation group Oceana, said she's unhappy with a plan emerging from Sens. John Kerry (D-Mass.), Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) and Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.) -- the three lead Senate climate negotiators -- to open up the nation's coastlines for offshore oil and gas drilling.

"We've always felt there's no place for expanding drilling in a climate bill," Savitz said. "That's not to say we're going to stop the drilling overnight. But to open up whole new areas, and put a whole new complement of infrastructure when we should be moving away from that particular energy source, doesn't make sense. We're not going to stand by and readily watch that happen."

And Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, is urging lawmakers to vote against the Senate climate bill if it includes language that strips U.S. EPA of its authority to control greenhouse gas emissions under the 40-year-old Clean Air Act, a concession Lieberman said last week he would have to make to win over moderate Democrats and Republicans.

Suckling said he also isn't sure about the integrity of the short- and long-term greenhouse gas emission limits being proposed by the three senators, which he says don't come anywhere close to what the science suggests is needed from the world's second-biggest contributor to global warming.

"Scientists have determined that reducing carbon pollution to 350 parts per million is necessary to preserve life as we know it," Suckling said. "Three hundred fifty parts per million must be the bottom line for all climate and energy policies."

FOE's Pica said he's inclined to give Kerry the benefit of the doubt until more details of the climate proposal are released. Still, he said he's not thrilled with some of the details emerging on EPA pre-emption and more nuclear loan guarantees. He also doesn't like news reports that the senator is leading closed-door meetings with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Petroleum Institute and other longtime foes that have attacked past climate proposals.

"We're worried they're the first ones in the room to get a briefing," he said.

'Range of views'

Other environmental groups -- including the Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation

and Natural Resources Defense Council -- are trying to hold the line on the still-evolving Senate climate proposal.

Last Friday, 20 groups issued a statement praising the Senate's lead negotiators for their efforts and said the bill's goal for curbing emissions 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020 "represents the leadership needed by the U.S. Senate to create jobs, increase energy security, reduce carbon pollution and protect public health."

Jeremy Symons, the National Wildlife Federation's senior vice president for programs, downplayed any further disagreement among the environmental groups.

"There always has been a range of views," he said. "We're not a monolith. That's healthy."

Others are pushing back more aggressively against the more left-leaning groups.

Daniel Weiss, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress Action Fund, said Friends of the Earth and some of the other groups have been advocating for unrealistic legislative approaches. "These groups are longtime opponents of any bill that could pass one house or another," he said.

Weiss also pushed back against the Center for Biological Diversity and other groups that would prefer EPA regulate greenhouse gases, citing efforts on Capitol Hill this year to strike the agency's authority even without a climate law.

"EPA is unlikely to have clear sailing to set global warming pollution standards

under the Clean Air Act,” he said. “Big Oil’s congressional allies will do everything they can to block EPA.”

Weiss said he expects the Senate’s three top climate negotiators to address many concerns being raised on key issues dear to environmentalists. On offshore drilling, for example, he expects provisions to be added that are better than current law, where there is no protection for the coasts except at Florida’s Destin Dome.

As for emission limits, Weiss points out that Kerry, Graham and Lieberman are considering elements of a carbon tax on transportation fuels, something Friends of the Earth has long wanted.

“This bill could have features that some in the environmental community have long wanted but have not been included in other bills,” he said.

More important are the potential political consequences if Obama and the Democrats hold out beyond the 2010 elections, where Republicans are projected to pick up a number of seats. Should the GOP catch a wave and back the majority, climate skeptics like Sen. Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma and Rep. Joe Barton of Texas could return to their slots atop committees with jurisdiction on the climate issue.

“The question I’d have for Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace, do they really think it’s going to be easier to pass global climate change legislation next Congress when there’s 20 to 30 to 40 less Democrats?” asked a former Capitol Hill Democratic aide who has worked with environmentalists. “You can’t ignore the raw politics aspect of this.”

“They have a real big decision to make,” said Marc Morano, director of the skeptic Web site “Climate Depot” and a former Inhofe spokesman. “They’re looking at two to four to six years before they have another chance to pass any kind of environmental legislation. It’s a major gut check for the environmental movement to figure out how to play this.”

Change the votes?

Whether any environmental issue will lead to a shift in a possible Senate vote remains an open question.

Talk of including oil and gas drilling in Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is seen by many as the bridge too far -- and sponsors to date have said they have no plans to go there. But Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) last week said he would consider a filibuster if the Senate proposal included offshore energy exploration outside of Alaska.

“I have opposed drilling at every turn, and I don’t know anything that would change my mind about that,” he said.

Others doubt whether anyone from the environmental left would actually halt floor action on one of Obama’s top domestic initiatives.

“A Bernie Sanders will complain about the provision, but does he vote ‘no’?” said a former Capitol Hill Democratic aide, referring to the Vermont independent who has questioned less aggressive climate proposals.

Sanders last week acknowledged the tough challenge facing the bill’s sponsors.

“The difficulty Sen. Kerry or anybody has, you don’t have 60 votes to pass a strong global warming bill, which in fact will move us away from fossil fuel and greenhouse gas emissions to sustainable energy and energy efficiency, we don’t have the votes,” Sanders said. “It’s a very conservative institution; we don’t have the votes. So the choice is that I expect Senator Kerry is wrestling with is whether it’s better to something or nothing.”

Oceana’s Savitz said her group may eventually support the bill, but she’s trying now to make sure her issue “doesn’t get thrown under the bus.”

“Each organization gets to decide where exactly they’re going to come out,” she added. “The community is trying as best it can to hold together.”

Regardless of the vote prospects, opponents are reveling in the discord on the left.

“It’s doing more damage to the environmental movement that they’re even considering this,” said Morano. “They’re having severe anxiety and stomach pains regarding this entire situation. It looks like Democrats are content to pass any bill, even a pork-laden energy bill, but they’re going to declare it a climate bill. This is a hard, tough pill for them to swallow.”

Longtime Capitol Hill observers aren’t surprised, either, that environmental groups are battling with each other. After all, this has been a mainstay on most other major pieces of legislation. Said the former Democratic aide of environmentalists, “They’re really good at eating their young.”

