

Green groups welcome delay

By MARIN COGAN

The news that Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) was walking away from tripartisan talks over climate and energy legislation, “temporarily” delaying a rollout of the bill, disappointed many of the key players who worked on it.

But some environmental groups, frustrated over the senators’ plans to limit the Environmental Protection Agency’s authority and make concessions to fossil-fuel emitters, are seeing opportunity in the breakdown.

“There’s definitely a silver lining,” said Nick Berning of Friends of the Earth, an environmental group that said last week it didn’t expect to support the bill drafted by Sens. Graham, John Kerry (D-Mass.) and Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.).

“I think there is an opportunity, if [the Kerry-Graham-Lieberman bill] really is stalled. It will give the environmental community, the administration and the enlightened business community some time to take a step back and maybe look at ... how existing tools work,” said Bill Snape of the Center for Biological Diversity, which was also likely to oppose the bill.

Chief among the concerns of environmental groups was a provision in the bill that would restrict the ability of the EPA and individual states to regulate greenhouse gas emissions.

Business groups considered the provision essential, arguing that it

would ensure regulatory consistency. It was also essential to rounding up GOP support.

An amendment by Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) to hinder the EPA’s efforts to regulate major greenhouse gas emitters had the support of 40 senators. Sen. George Voinovich (R-Ohio) introduced his own legislation last week that would provide a sweeping pre-emption of state and federal laws.

But it was fiercely opposed by environmental groups supportive of states like California, which is moving ahead on efforts to limit emissions.

“I think there’s a lot of unanimity in terms of protecting the EPA,” said Damon Moglen, director of the global warming campaign for Greenpeace, which also opposed the bill. “I think you’re going to see the community absolutely close ranks, demanding EPA’s authority be protected, as with state regulatory authority. That’s a line in the sand, and it’s going to give the environmental community more time to draw that more deeply.”

“For now, at least, the Clean Air Act is going to remain intact, and hopefully it means there’s going to be a broader rethinking among Democrats on their strategy on energy and climate,” Berning said.

Graham’s decision to walk away from negotiations made the chances of getting other Republicans on board considerably more difficult.



Some environmental group had already announced that they didn’t expect to support the bill Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) had helped to draft.

Reuters

Even as Kerry and Lieberman work to get him back, some green groups hope his absence will cause Democrats to reassess a hallmark of Graham’s strategy: reaching out to business and industry leaders in hopes they’d support the final product.

“An announcement was going to happen today with three major petroleum industry executives up there — a picture is worth a thousand words,” Moglen said.

Still, other big environmental groups were willing to accept a bill with objectionable provisions as a starting point to be improved on in order to get limits on emissions.

“The pure fact that there was a process going was very important in showing the way forward this year,” said Alex Posorske of 1Sky. “On that level, it’s not news we’d like to see, and we’re urging the senators to continue to work.”

“The Kerry-Graham-Lieberman proposal can serve as a foundation on which we can liberate America from dependence on foreign oil, create millions of new, clean energy manufacturing, construction and service jobs here at home and slash the carbon pollution that is threatening our economy, our health and our climate,” Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune said in a statement this week.

“We ask the Senate and President [Barack] Obama to work with the bill’s sponsors to move this process forward, strengthen the bill — drawing on the

best features of proposals by other senators — and take it to the floor for consideration by the full Senate in the coming weeks.”

“We can’t think of a higher legislative priority than to get comprehensive clean energy and climate legislation passed for the country,” the Natural Resources Defense Council’s Bob Deans said.

As Kerry and Lieberman work to get negotiations back on track, some in the environmental community are looking at a potential backup plan that already has at least one Republican supporter:

the “cap-and-dividend” bill introduced by Sens. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) and Susan Collins (R-Maine), which would return to consumers revenues raised from federal permit auctions.

It is supported by some environmental groups but criticized by others as politically infeasible.

“Cantwell-Collins is a perfect example of a bill that, while it may not be perfect, is intelligent, incremental and understandable. That is absolutely the type of bill we should be looking at,” Snape said.