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Environmental Rift Widens

Liberals Clash With Obama and Each Other on Stance on Spill and Climate Change

By PETER WALLSTEN and ELIZA GRAY

President Barack Obama's political response to the Gulf oil spill has exacerbated long-simmering tensions on the left over climate-change legislation and oil drilling.

The conflict came into view this week in the aftermath of Mr. Obama's Oval Office address on the spill, when environmentalists, bloggers and even sympathetic commentators accused Mr. Obama of failing to lay out a tough legislative response that seized on the public's outrage over the spill.

Complicating matters, green groups themselves have split over whether to attack or support the White House.

In his address Tuesday, Mr. Obama pledged to work for a climate bill, but said he was open to ideas from both parties. He pointedly didn't embrace proposals that have strong support on the left to cap carbon emissions and cut down on drilling. That prompted a week-long series of attacks on the president from some of his closest allies.

"I've been disappointed," said Kyle Ash, a lobbyist for the activist group Greenpeace. "This really is just a slightly better version of what I would have expected a Republican White House to do if there was a disaster like this in the Gulf."

A number of liberals also turned their

fire on long-established environmental groups that remain closely allied with the administration, including the Sierra Club. The group's executive director, Michael Brune—prompted by liberal blogger Jane Hamsher, who said the group was playing "an inside game" with the White House—shot back on the Huffington Post website. He noted how he and his colleagues had mobilized to block expansions of coal mining and oil drilling.

Still, Mr. Brune conceded that he has seen "reluctance by smart campaigners and organizations to criticize the president, primarily because those people or groups support much of what the administration is trying to do."

Some liberals are wary of compromise. Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity, a group that has sued the federal government over its drilling policy, said he was miffed that the White House hadn't rescinded its March 31 expansion of drilling plans in the Atlantic Ocean.

"In the midst of this crisis, it indicates the administration is more concerned with angering potential conservative supporters of its climate bill than it is in reining in the abuses that caused the spill," he said.

Liberal commentator Rachel Maddow, disappointed with the White House's response to the oil spill,

dubbed herself the "fake president" on her Wednesday MSNBC show, sat before an Oval Office backdrop and delivered the address she wished the president had given, pledging a halt to all dangerous drilling and to deliver an energy bill to eventually end U.S. consumption of oil.

The criticism has irked the White House, which has sought to assure some commentators and activists that the president will push for the strongest measure possible. He will meet with a bipartisan group of senators Wednesday to try to get an energy bill on track, including ideas ranging from a broad cap on carbon emissions to a cap only on carbon from electric utilities, said White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel.

"The president's view is for inviting a wide range of people who have ideas," Mr. Emanuel said. Democrats in the Senate are split on the best approach, despite Mr. Obama's call, and what kind of energy bill Congress can pass remains unclear.

One point of contention between liberals and several major environmental groups concerns a possible Senate bill that would permit additional offshore drilling. Critics on the left have questioned why environmental lobbyists would support such legislation. Officials from several groups said Friday the process was in flux and wouldn't necessarily embrace drilling. The primary goal, they said, was winning caps on carbon emissions.

Jeremy Symons, senior vice president of the National Wildlife Federation,

another advocacy group with close ties to the White House, said his group wouldn't hesitate to criticize the party's leaders if the climate bill isn't strong enough.

"When they do the right thing we will support it, and when they don't, we'll call them on it," he said.

Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D., Md.) described tensions on the left as

"some differences over details," but said those disagreements "pale in comparison to the total opposition to a clean-energy plan from the Republican side."

Democrats sought Friday to shower more attention on the GOP uproar that ensued after Rep. Joe Barton (R., Texas) apologized to BP PLC during a hearing by referring to the \$20 billion victims fund as a "shakedown" by the White House.

Republican leaders this week denounced Mr. Barton. A spokesman for the GOP's House campaign committee, Ken Spain, waved off the idea that Mr. Barton or the energy issue would affect voters this year, saying Democrats were trying to "distract" from a "culture of incompetence that has resulted in the mismanagement of the federal bureaucracy, the economy, and the ballooning deficit."