



CLIMATE:

Obama to lay out ambitious global warming plan

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Jean Chemnick, E&E reporter

President Obama is set to provide details tomorrow of how he plans to deliver on his second-term promise of tackling man-made climate change.

Obama announced in a video this weekend that he will lay out his climate agenda in a speech at Georgetown University and that it will seek to “reduce carbon pollution, prepare our country for the impacts of climate change and lead global efforts to fight it.”

The announcement follows months of speculation about how Obama would make good on his inaugural and State of the Union vows to again make global warming an administration priority.

He billed the plan as good for the United States economically, employing scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs and workers to develop and build a low-carbon economy.

He also returned to a theme from his January inaugural speech, saying that addressing climate change is about protecting the next generation. “When it comes to the world we leave our children, we owe it to them to do what we can,” he said.

Industry officials vowed to fight the plan if it contains overly burdensome regulations. Last week, House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) panned the president’s yet-to-be-released climate change plans as “absolutely crazy,” certain to increase the cost of energy and “kill more American jobs.”

Environmentalists applauded Obama’s pending announcement but said they will be listening closely for an expected presidential commitment to curb greenhouse gases from today’s fossil-fuels utilities.

“He knows that addressing climate change is not only an obligation we have to the next generation, but something we owe ourselves -- because it means modernizing our energy system in order to generate electricity that is reliable, affordable, healthy and clean,” Environmental Defense Fund President Fred Krupp said in a statement.

Natural Resources Defense Council President Frances Beinecke took slight exception to the president’s statement in the video that “there’s no single step that can reverse the effects of climate change.”

She said, “The single-most important thing we can do, as a nation, is to reduce the dangerous carbon pollution from our power plants,” noting that the sector accounts for 40 percent of U.S. CO2 emissions.

The Sierra Club’s Michael Brune concurred. “Establishing strong pollution standards for new and existing power plants is critical for protecting our families and our planet from runaway climate disruption and is something our coalition has worked mightily to achieve,” he said.

EDF, NRDC, the Sierra Club and others have been laying the groundwork for years for U.S. EPA rules to curb new and existing power plant emissions (see related story). They sued the agency to regulate CO2 under the Clean Air Act, pressed for curbs on utility-sector emissions and kept up the pressure on allies in the administration who put off finalizing a rule for yet-to-be built power plants while repeatedly saying they had “no plans” to regulate CO2 from today’s power fleet.

Now the White House appears to be signaling that it may be time to make those plans after all.

Details of the rumored White House announcement had been trickling out for weeks, but last week, the president and a senior aide hinted that existing power plant rules will probably be part of that mix.

Speaking Wednesday during a visit to Germany -- a country that has slashed

its own emissions by a quarter compared with 1990 levels, mostly by reducing the carbon intensity of its power sector -- the president called climate change the “global threat of our time” (Greenwire, June 19.)

His top energy and climate change adviser, Heather Zichal, told a Washington, D.C., audience on the same day that her boss sees climate change as “a legacy issue” and offered the Clean Air Act as a tool that history has shown could be used to combat power plant emissions successfully (Greenwire, June 19).

Green groups said last week that they were expecting to see years of work pay off.

“Presumably, this is the moment that we have been waiting for since the Massachusetts v. EPA case was decided,” said Joshua Saks, legislative director for the National Wildlife Federation, referring to the landmark 2007 Supreme Court decision that started EPA down the path to carbon regulations. “And we are doing everything we can to be ready to respond and to support this, assuming that it takes the necessary steps forward.”

Greens say they are prepared to push for a rule that makes a significant dent in the emissions of a sector that is responsible for 40 percent of the United States’ CO2.

“Now that we have rumblings of a potential climate plan on the horizon, we are ramping up work to make sure that that’s a strong plan and that we are set to spread the word about that announcement if and

when it happens,” said Nathan Wilcox, Environment America’s federal global warming director.

League of Conservation Voters (LCV) President Gene Karpinski said, “This is one of the most important campaigns our community has ever put together to elevate support for a historic set of proposals.”

Even after the regulations are finalized, he added, environmental groups are poised to align with other advocates in the public health, labor and business spheres to stave off an all-but-guaranteed push to undo them legislatively.

Greens not satisfied?

But while environmentalists celebrated, some hinted that whatever Obama proposes tomorrow will not be enough to stave off the growing threat of catastrophic climate change.

The Sierra Club’s Brune said Obama’s climate “legacy” will not be secure unless he eventually rejects the Keystone XL oil pipeline.

“A clear and bold commitment from the president to address climate disruption also gives us hope that he is prepared to cement his legacy by rejecting the dirty and dangerous Keystone XL pipeline, ending destructive oil drilling in the Arctic, halting mountaintop removal, and abandoning dirty energy,” he said.

But many have speculated that Obama may be offering his climate commitments now to mollify environmentalists ahead of a decision later in the year to approve the Alberta-to-Texas oil sands pipeline.

And Bill Snape of the Center for Biological Diversity said Obama should commit to extend EPA’s regulatory scope beyond the utility sector to other industries that contribute heavily to global warming.

“The international targets the U.S. have announced are clearly well below what the best science says we need, even from a pro-rated perspective of U.S. global contributions,” he said in an email, referring to Obama’s pledge that the United States would cut its emissions 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020.

He suggested that EPA use the Clean Air Act to implement a broader cap on greenhouse gas emissions. “Such a move could actually allow the US significant leverage with our trading partners,” he said.

Industry push-back

Meanwhile, industry is prepared to go on the defense if Obama announces tomorrow that his administration will move ahead with existing power plant rules.

“The law does not allow the president a broad range of options for addressing carbon emissions from existing power plants,” said Scott Segal of Bracewell & Giuliani in an email. “If he pushes the envelope, and

suggests a plan with unrealistic time-tables or emissions limits, the plan may well violate the spirit and text of the Clean Air Act.”

NRDC has put forward a proposal that would allow utilities some flexibility in reducing their emissions from existing plants but hold them to a strict standard. But industry lawyers have argued that it oversteps the limits of the section of the Clean Air Act that EPA would use to regulate emissions from existing sources.

By requiring emissions reductions that are not technologically feasible, said Segal, EPA could drive up power costs and stop economic recovery.

This track would “even force energy-intensive manufacturing overseas, thus increasing carbon emissions as goods flow back to the United States,” he said.

He recommended that Obama stick to “win-win” strategies like energy efficiency and “steer clear of untenable regulations.”

Reporter Elana Schor contributed.