

Obama's climate push takes center stage – EPA meets most climate change goals

By ANDREW RESTUCCIA

The Obama administration and its supporters fanned out around the country Tuesday to press the case for acting on climate change, arguing on the Hill, at packed Environmental Protection Agency hearings and in a new White House report that the price for doing nothing is far too high.

The climate offensive reflects liberals' growing belief that reining in greenhouse gases is a winning political issue among Latinos, women and young people, especially if framed as a boost for public health and the economy — even as moderate Democrats struggle to defend President Barack Obama's policies in key states that could flip the Senate in November.

Not since the failed push to pass a cap-and-trade bill in Obama's first term have the White House, congressional Democrats and



The Obama administration and its supporters press the case for acting on climate change. | Getty

their green allies mounted such a coordinated drive to sell an environmental policy.

At dawn Tuesday, the White House released a report that said inaction on climate change could come with a \$150 billion price tag — a message Senate Democrats amplified at a Budget Committee hearing hours later. Then came the day's big event, as lawmakers, activists

and business leaders rallied in Washington, Atlanta and Denver on the first day of EPA's marathon public hearings on its proposed climate rule for existing power plants.

The rule is the centerpiece of Obama's climate agenda, and environmental and public health groups showed up at the hearings en masse to champion the cause. So did prominent

critics, who denounced the proposal as a reckless gamble with coal-dependent jobs and the reliability of the electric grid.

Outside EPA's headquarters in downtown D.C., people got free ice cream courtesy of Al Gore's Climate Reality Project and Ben & Jerry's, greens waved handheld windmills, and competing video billboards aired messages approving and condemning the rule. Supporters and opponents both described the debate in the grandest terms.

"When America sets strong environmental safeguards, that's when our innovative spirit rises to the challenge," said Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.), one of several lawmakers on both sides who showed up for EPA's hearing in D.C. "Millions of jobs are created. Millions of Americans are healthier. Our air is cleaner, our water safer."

Other supporters at the hearing included Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), who said climate change is already harming his state. Talk to "fishermen and oyster farmers in Oregon and you'll hear that climate change ... is not some distant threat," he said. Reps. Linda Sánchez (D-Calif.) and Anna Eshoo (D-Calif.) and Delaware Gov. Jack

Markell also testified in favor of the rule.

But Rep. Shelley Moore Capito (R-W.Va.) challenged EPA officials to come to her state to see how their regulations are harming people in coal country.

"The rule threatens West Virginia's economic survival," said Capito, who also testified at the hearing.

An executive of one coal company, Peabody Energy, even called for EPA to "withdraw" the rule.

"We are opposed to any proposal that would punish electricity consumers, have no material benefit under climate theory and act outside the bounds of the law," company Senior Vice President Fred Palmer said.

Separately, the Energy Department announced steps it will take to keep the nation's natural gas transmission and distribution systems from leaking climate-warming methane, while the White House and the Agriculture Department said they would take steps to help stem the effects of climate change on farming and food production.

On Capitol Hill, Senate Democrats seized on the new report

written by the White House Council of Economic Advisers to push the administration's argument that its climate change policies will give the U.S. a long-term economic advantage. The report said the costs of countering the effects of global warming increase 40 percent for every decade that policymakers delay taking significant action.

"This isn't just an environmental issue," Senate Budget Chairwoman Patty Murray (D-Wash.) said at her panel's hearing Tuesday morning. "It also poses serious risks to our economy and the federal budget."

In the House, board members of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission acknowledged during an Energy and Power Subcommittee hearing that the EPA rule could cause some challenges for the nation's energy network — for instance, if the constrained network of natural gas pipelines can't accommodate the administration's desire to see more gas use supplant coal. Building gas pipelines to handle the extra demand "is gonna cost money," FERC Chairwoman Cheryl LaFleur told lawmakers.

"We also don't know the unknown cost of leaving climate change unattended to, which is

not free,” LaFleur said. “But we’ll be working to make sure that the transition costs of pipeline and transmission — the things we regulate — are done in a reasonable way.”

On the other hand, FERC Commissioner John Norris sniped at Congress for failing to deal with the climate issue, saying inaction was amassing an “atmospheric debt” that must be paid.

“[Grid] reliability will always be one of my highest priorities,” Norris said. “But this rule is a very gradual transition, I believe a very necessary transition.”

Subcommittee Chairman Ed Whitfield (R-Ky.) denied that Congress had done nothing on the climate issue. “Congress did act by deciding not to act,” he said.

Meanwhile, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee’s clean air panel held a hearing on the “threats posed by climate change.”

Obama faced criticism from many greens throughout much of his first term for putting climate change largely on the back burner as issues like health care reform and the economy took priority. But with his re-

election safely behind him and his environmental legacy hanging in the balance, the president has made climate change a top priority in his second term. That was shown by the concerted push Tuesday, even as the administration copes with crises on the U.S.-Mexico border as well as in Israel and Ukraine.