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House Democrats reintroduce road map to carbon neutrality by 2050

BY RACHEL FRAZIN - 03/02/21 01:15 PM EST

House Democrats on Tuesday introduced a revamped version of a major bill aiming to get the country on the road to carbon neutrality by 2050.

"Today's introduction of the CLEAN Future Act promises that we will not stand idly by as the rest of the world transitions to clean economies and our workers get left behind, and that we will not watch from the sidelines as the climate crisis wreaks havoc on Americans' health and homes," said House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Frank Pallone Jr. (D-N.J.) in a statement.

The latest edition of the legislation, introduced by Pallone and Reps. Paul Tonko (D-N.Y.) and Bobby Rush (D-Ill.), also sets an interim target of reducing the country's greenhouse gas emissions to no more than half of what they were in 2005 by 2030.

One of the ways it plans to reach its goals is through a clean electricity standard, under which power retailers would need to provide 80 percent of their electricity from clean sources by 2030 and 100 percent by 2035.

This lines up with President Biden's stated goal of achieving a carbon-free power sector by 2035, and is 15 years more ambitious than the previous bill's goal of a decarbonized power sector by 2050.

For a period of time, fossil fuel producers would be able to earn partial credits under the standard by lowering their carbon intensity, but this would eventually be phased out.

In the 2030s, individual power providers may be able to extend their compliance obligations one year at a time with permission from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) if they submit alternative payments.

On a press call, the lawmakers were asked why they opted for a clean electricity standard rather than other market mechanisms such as putting a price on carbon emissions.

“It’s time to try something new,” Pallone responded, referencing failed proposals from the Clinton and Obama years.

“There’s also a lot of environmental justice concerns for allowing companies to pay to continue polluting,” he said.

The legislation also aims to tackle emissions from the transportation sector through measures including authorizing \$500 million to deploy electric vehicle equipment such as charging stations and authorizing \$2.5 billion annually to transition the country’s school bus fleet to zero-emission vehicles.

The bill would additionally set energy efficiency targets and standards for buildings and seek to provide more funding for energy efficiency in schools, homes, nonprofits and infrastructure.

The legislation, which would in total authorize \$565 billion over 10 years, also has an overarching requirement that 40 percent of funds made available through it would benefit communities that have faced environmental inequality.

In addition, it would prevent air pollution permits from being issued or renewed in areas that already face disparate pollution impacts and would create a new program to pay for the removal of lead service lines and replace them with iron and steel.

It would also create a program to give aid to local governments that lose revenue as a result of the net-zero transition.

The bill also aims to prevent hazardous waste sites from being impacted by floods and other possible impacts by climate change by setting a 10-year deadline to clean up sites with climate vulnerability.

The legislation has a good chance of passing the Democratically controlled House, but could face hurdles in the 50-50 Senate, where it would have to contend with the filibuster.

At least one Democratic senator has expressed openness to evading the filibuster and passing a clean electricity standard through budget reconciliation, but Senate swing vote Sen. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.) is skeptical of proposed clean electricity requirements.

Asked how to get the legislation across the finish line, and whether it could be done through budget reconciliation, Pallone said he'd prefer to use "regular order," but added that he won't "rule anything out."

"I'm hoping that the Republicans will participate so we don't have to go through reconciliation," he said.

The legislation received praise from many environmentalists, but some argued that it still doesn't go far enough.

"We need to slash emissions 70% in 10 years, and we need firm cuts in greenhouse gases right now, not just gimmicky incentives, or future generations will suffer from our inaction today," said Brett Hartl, government affairs director at the Center for Biological Diversity, in a statement, though he added that the bill "improves on last year's abysmal proposal."

—*Updated at 3 p.m.*