



To Win Support for Clean Power Plan, Environmental Groups Look to Same-Sex Marriage Fight

Susan Sharon

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This is an important week for defenders of the Clean Power Plan, the centerpiece of President Barack Obama's strategy to combat climate change. Tuesday is the deadline for states, utilities and environmental groups who support it to file briefs.

The plan, which is currently being challenged in the U.S. Court of Appeals, would allow the Environmental Protection Agency to set the first-ever limits on carbon emissions from power plants.

Here in Maine, environmental groups are part of a coordinated national campaign to build support for the plan. As we report in our latest installment of [Beyond 350: Confronting Climate Change](#), they're borrowing from the successful playbook of the effort to legalize same-sex marriage.

The arrival of baby pigs is a rite of spring at the Black Acres Farm in Wilton, where 60 noisy cows, a flock of chickens and a territorial rooster also make their home. But the farm's maple sugaring operation that used to be characterized by warm, 45 degree days and chilly 25 degree nights in March is less dependable than ever, says Russell Black, who has been producing maple syrup for 50 years on this 750-acre farm that once belonged to his grandfather.

"There's no snow here on the ground," he says. "Normally there would be 2-3 feet of snow. Sometimes we have to tap the trees with buckets up into the limbs on the roadside because the snowbanks were so high. I didn't use a set of snowshoes this year at all."

Black has noticed a big swing in weather patterns, and it's not just the maple sugar operations that are affected. Black also sells hay, but he says he can no longer plan on cutting it in June like he did 40 years ago, because June has become one of the wettest months of the year.

That's why Black, who's a member of the Maine Legislature, has become an advocate for action on climate change.

"I actually spent four days in Washington, D.C., this summer lobbying our congressional delegation for the Clean Power Act, which is not very popular with my Republican colleagues," Black says. "I'm one of the few Republicans in the state of Maine that will come out as an elected official and support it."

The Clean Power Plan calls for cutting carbon emissions from power plants by nearly a third of 2005 levels by the year 2030.

More than two dozen states, utilities, trade associations and labor unions have filed suit against the plan, saying that EPA is overstepping its authority to regulate carbon emissions and that the plan will interfere with states' individual rights by requiring them to use less coal and more wind power, solar or natural gas.

"Of course right now you have an extremist in the White House. So, they're doing everything they can through regulations that they can't do through legislation," says Republican Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma in a discussion last month with the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank.

As chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, Inhofe is one of 200 members of Congress who filed a "friend of the court" brief in opposition to the Clean Power Plan.

Opponents say it will be too costly to consumers and do little to improve climate. But while attorneys from both sides file briefs and weigh in with legal arguments, environmental groups are waging a multimillion-dollar campaign across the country to try to prevail in the court of public opinion.

"The plan has been a major priority for us because it is the biggest and most historic thing that the U.S. has ever done and proposed to tackle climate change," says Laura Dorle, campaigns director for Environment Maine.

The group is working with other groups like the Natural Resources Council of Maine, Maine Conservation Voters, the Sierra Club and 350.org to keep stories about the effects of climate change in Maine in the spotlight and to tout the economic benefits of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, a cap and trade program known for short as RGGI that has helped businesses invest in energy efficiency.

Dorle says part of their strategy and reason for optimism is guided by the Supreme Court's decision to legalize same-sex marriage.

"We've seen the shift in public opinion, you know, moving from states passing laws to deny the rights of gay marriage to people, to finally winning at the Supreme Court level was pretty impressive, and that wouldn't have happened without all the organizing on the ground," she says.

And it's why environmental groups are doing all they can to champion the votes of Maine's U.S. senators, independent Angus King and Republican Susan Collins, for their support of climate change initiatives, including the Clean Power Plan.

Collins says her view of the environment was shaped by growing up around the potato farms of Aroostook County. But, like Russell Black, she's also a minority in her party for what she calls her "common-sense approach" to climate change.

"My hope is that as more and more senators see the impact on their own states that there will be growing support to do something affirmative about climate change," Collins says.

The D.C. Circuit Court will hear oral arguments on the Clean Power Plan on June 2.