

Westerman sees bipartisan path for permitting overhaul

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House Natural Resources Chairman Bruce Westerman, R-Ark., remains optimistic that there will be bipartisan support for a permitting overhaul this Congress, legislation he said is necessary to modernize the nation's bedrock environmental regulations.

Westerman, currently in his fifth term, took over the chairmanship in January after one term as the ranking member. While the committee has a reputation as a forum for strong disagreements, Westerman said it is a "fun" panel to work on since many of those disagreements are born from a passion for the issues at hand.

Last week, his committee considered changes to one of the nation's main environmental regulations, the National Environmental Policy Act, which has been a topic of fierce debate. This included two hearings on bills introduced by Westerman and Rep. Garret Graves, R-La.

At a hearing on Graves' bill, during which Democratic members raised concerns that it would in effect gut NEPA, Westerman said the proposal was not final. However, in an interview with CQ Roll Call, he noted that White House officials and some Democratic members of the committee have voiced a willingness to support changes to the permitting system in some form.

"People might put on a facade about wanting to stand up and protect the foundational environmental laws, but everybody knows that things aren't happening," said Westerman. "We're not building the decarbonizing infrastructure that they want, and we're causing energy prices to go higher because of the attack on fossil fuels, so there is a pathway to get to a better place."

Last year a permitting overhaul proposal from Senate Energy and Natural Resources Chairman Joe Manchin III, D-W.Va., was not included in end-of-year legislation. Having spoken with Manchin this Congress, Westerman said his goal is to "get something that addresses and solves the problem and get bipartisan support" and that he believes they can ultimately reach a compromise that can pass in both chambers.

An engineer and forester, Westerman said the current permitting system has affected the ability to respond to wildfires and droughts and made it too costly to build energy development and

transmission projects. While some members — most notably ranking member Raúl M. Grijalva, D-Ariz. — said the changes Westerman supports would weaken protections, Westerman said the system would still guarantee robust environmental reviews.

‘Not worth the squeeze’

Many project developers won’t consider working on federal lands, he said, because of the time and cost of the permitting process. He cited notable projects that have been blocked or delayed by permitting and other federal actions, including the Twin Metals copper and nickel mine in northern Minnesota. Noting his professional experience, Westerman said projects on federal lands have become increasingly uneconomic for investors, who may ultimately conclude that “juice isn’t worth the squeeze when you’re dealing with the federal government.”

Westerman said he is also eager to consider forestry-related legislation, including a bill on which he partnered last Congress with now-Speaker Kevin McCarthy that aims to speed up bureaucratic processes governing woodland management in California’s sequoia forests. He also hopes to revisit the Trillion Trees proposal, which he said goes beyond the “catchy” topline proposal of planting more trees — which absorb carbon and emit oxygen — to take care of the existing forests and promote new markets for forestry products.

On climate, Westerman said he is excited about the prospect of Republicans leading on the issue “because we actually propose things that work.” He was critical of last year’s climate, health care and tax law, saying it is overly reliant upon subsidies to existing technologies, such as electric vehicles and solar panels, to drive down emissions.

“When you look at the global climate picture, the effects that an electric vehicle can have on that are teeny tiny. I’m talking less than 1 percent of global carbon emissions if every vehicle, every car and light-duty truck in America became an electric vehicle overnight,” said Westerman. “And how does that technology export to the developing world, where the real emissions are coming from?”

An assessment from the conservative Cato Institute, using figures from Energy Department data, estimates the amount would be just over 2 percent. Emissions from cars and light trucks account for just over half of transportation emissions, a sector that accounts for 27 percent of U.S. emissions.

Westerman said any plan that is overly reliant on subsidies runs the risk of simply subsidizing an older technology that is unable to stand on its own, reducing any incentive to innovate. Instead, he said a focus on a wider range of technologies — including nuclear, carbon sequestration or wood pellets produced from a sustainable forest — could help produce energy that reduces emissions, remains affordable and can be utilized in the developing world.

He also spoke enthusiastically about the role that biochar, a technique of heating biomass to create a form of carbon charcoal that can be used to enrich soil, could have as a carbon capture and sequestration technology. His Trillion Trees legislation included a provision addressing the technology, and he said he hopes to have a hearing on it this Congress.

