



Senate passes energy bill with overwhelming bipartisan support

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Republicans and Democrats united in the Senate today to pass the first large piece of energy legislation since 2007, a bill that seeks to modernize the US energy infrastructure.

The Energy Policy Modernization Act received broad approval from both sides of the aisle, ultimately passing 85 to 12. It amends several prior bills, including the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007, the Energy Conservation and Production Act, and the Energy Policy and Conservation Act.

Drafted in response to changing energy standards and technologies, the bill addresses sustainable construction, renewable energy, and cybersecurity for energy infrastructure.

Specifically, the bill would promote upgrades in the power grid to respond in energy production changes since 2007, including increasing levels of wind and solar power production.

The bill would also authorize the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a victory for environmental groups, and the building of ports for shipping American-sourced natural gas overseas, a victory for the fossil fuel industry.

Senators Lisa Murkowski (R) of Alaska, the chair of the Senate Energy Committee, and Maria Cantwell (D) of Washington led the charge on this legislation.

Sen. Murkowski says that the bill's passage is proof that the federal government is capable of being productive, even in politically fraught election years.

"Most people thought we couldn't achieve anything," The New York Times reports Sen. Murkowski saying, "but we have demonstrated that we can legislate — and we can even legislate, oh my gosh, in an election year."

Environmental policy analyst Peter Van Doren of the Cato Institute told The Christian Science Monitor by phone that the reason this bill had passed was less due to genuine goodwill than the success of each side's agenda.

"The only time we get bipartisan agreement," Mr. Van Doren said, "is when each side gets what it wants in terms of spending."

Yet despite its appeal in the Senate, the bill did not go without critics.

Although Sara Chieffo, the vice president for government affairs at the League of Conservation Voters, conceded that the bill provided for some important provisions as well as "modest improvements" in areas like research and energy efficiency, she argued that it also weakens certain environmental policies.

"It also contains far too many damaging, anti-environmental provisions," the The Washington Post reports Ms. Chieffo saying, "such as exemptions from EPA's clean air protections, weakened environmental review, and increased export and development of fossil fuels."

The Environmental Defense Fund Action (EDF Action) also issued a statement today about the bill's passage in the Senate.

"There are a few examples of where the bill gets it right," said EDF Action President Elizabeth Thompson, "including grid modernization and increasing clean energy, and the Sensible Accounting to Value Energy (SAVE) amendment, which would help American families save money through energy efficiency."

At the same time, Ms. Thompson says, the government needs to take a more active role in confronting climate change.

"At a time when America needs strong leadership and decisive climate action," Thompson said, "this bill is a missed opportunity."

The White House also expressed concerns about the bill in January. A statement issued by the Office of Management and Budget states that concerns included budgetary and implementation issues.

The White House did not, however, threaten to veto the legislation. The next step for this bill is to combine with similar legislation from the House of Representatives.