



Climate bill could face tough road in the Senate

Published: Oct. 1, 2009 at 6:15 PM

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New legislation aimed at reducing greenhouse gases began a potentially arduous ascent through the Senate this week, even as the Environmental Protection Agency announced its own plans to cap carbon emissions if Congress fails to do so.

Although the House of Representatives' passage of a climate bill earlier this year aired many of the controversies, the Senate version will likely face challenges and changes in its path to a vote, while the White House looks to affirm its leadership on climate change prior to the U.N. climate conference in December in Copenhagen.

After several months of delays because of the healthcare debate, Sens. John Kerry, D-Mass., and Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., unveiled the Clean Energy Jobs and American Power Act Tuesday. The bill calls for a stronger cap on emissions than the House version, seeking a 20 percent reduction from 2005 levels by 2020 and 83 percent by 2050 compared with the House's 17 percent reduction.

"We don't need to be sending billions of dollars overseas, some of which finds its way to the support of jihadists, terrorists in various countries," Kerry said Tuesday. "We can invest that money right here at home and put our future back in our own control."

Kerry highlighted climate legislation as the new linchpin of U.S. economic and security stability, while Republican senators responded that the proposed cap-and-trade policies would hurt jobs in the natural resource industries and weaken the economy.

"Despite an earnest attempt, including eight months of deliberation and negotiation to refashion the obvious, Senators Boxer and Kerry produced yet another massive energy tax that will destroy jobs, raise electricity and gasoline prices and make America less competitive," Oklahoma's Sen. James Inhofe, the top Republican on the Senate energy committee, said in a statement.

"While I've noted that the Democrats have the votes to pass this bill through the ... committee, that does not mean Republicans will stand down."

No Republican senators were on hand to support the bill's unveiling Tuesday. It has also drawn mixed support from moderate Democrats in areas reliant on natural resources industry.

Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., opposed the bill because he said it would hurt the coal industry, calling it "a disappointing step in the wrong direction."

On the same day that Boxer and Kerry presented their bill, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson said that the agency is ready to crack down on greenhouse gas emissions from large industrial facilities under the Clean Air Act.

While Congress has indicated it would rather pass its own legislation, the potential EPA rule could give senators room to step away from the controversial bill.

"The EPA yesterday basically gave a lot of senators a lot of cover to vote against cutting off debate, essentially killing the bill," said Patrick Michaels, a senior environmental studies fellow at the libertarian think tank Cato Institute.

Michaels, who said he doesn't think the Senate Democratic leadership can muster the necessary 60 votes to block a filibuster, called the targets laid out by the Kerry-Boxer bill "hardly moderate."

After facing markup in the Environmental and Public Works Committee that Boxer chairs, the bill must traverse other Senate committees, such as Finance, Agriculture, Commerce, Energy and Natural Resources and Foreign Relations, with jurisdiction.

Support for the bill will be more about the effects on regional industries than partisanship, said Tony Kreindler, climate spokesman for the Environmental Defense Fund.

"What the House was really successful in doing is coming up with a framework that was fair and equitable for different regions of the country, for different states that have different energy mixes," he said.

With the climate bill playing second fiddle to the healthcare revamp, it's unlikely that it will get through Congress to the president by the U.N. Climate Change Conference in December.

"The key there is going (to Copenhagen) with enough so the (United States) has leadership for credentials in the negotiations (and) a big part of that is going to be how far we get in the Senate and, importantly, how much support that effort has from a diverse group of senators," Kreindler said.

"We're going to need the White House to show some leadership, just to focus the minds of the people on the Hill."

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