

WASHINGTON UPDATE – 6/5/2009

Comprehensive Climate Change Legislation Clears Major Hurdle in U.S. House

On Thursday, May 21, after weeks of negotiations and late-night debates, the House Energy and Commerce Committee approved H.R. 2454, the "American Clean Energy and Security Act," known colloquially as the Waxman-Markey climate change bill, by a vote of 33 to 25. The vote fell largely along party lines, with only one Republican voting in favor of the bill – Mary Bono Mack of Calif. – and only four Democrats voting against it.

The 932-page bill is comprehensive energy and climate change legislation and includes a national Renewable Electricity Standard, authorization for a national electric Smart Grid, new incentives for energy efficiency and the production of renewable energy, and as its centerpiece, a regulatory cap-and-trade system that would for the first time in American history place national limits on greenhouse gas emissions and impose a price for the release of those emissions. Specifically, it would require a 17 percent economy-wide reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 and move up gradually to an 83 percent reduction by 2050.

The legislation also includes a major climate adaptation title and would establish a number of inter-agency programs and councils within the federal government to direct and supervise climate impact assessment and adaptation. Notably, the bill includes placeholder language for the creation of a NOAA-centered National Climate Service that is likely to be fleshed out before or during consideration in the full House. A National Climate Service would integrate existing climate services within the federal government, serve as a clearinghouse for national and regional data on the impacts of climate change, and deliver relevant and scientifically-accurate information to end-users and decision-makers who will increasingly be faced with a need to adapt strategically to the changing climate.

Several lawmakers – including the Rep. Bart Gordon (D-TN), Chairman of the House Science & Technology Committee and Rep. Madeleine Bordallo (D-Guam), Chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans, and Wildlife, within the House Natural Resources Committee -- have introduced stand-alone bills that would create a National Climate Service. Each is working to build support for inclusion of their bill in H.R. 2454.

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi plans to bring H.R. 2454 before the full House of Representatives before its month-long August recess. The Senate appears to be waiting for the House to act before taking up legislation itself, but Democratic Congressional leadership in both chambers are unified in supporting major climate change legislation. President Obama has taken a keen personal interest in the passage of major climate change legislation this year as well and has called on Congress to pass a bill before the renegotiation discussions for the now outdated Kyoto Treaty in Copenhagen this December. When negotiations were breaking down in the House Energy and Commerce Committee in mid-May, Obama re-energized the Committee with a renewed and personal call for action on climate change.

National Climate Service Bills Advance in U.S. House, Compete For Consideration

On June 3, 2009, the House Committee on Science and Technology reported H.R. 2407, the "National Climate Service Act of 2009," out of committee with a favorable recommendation to the full House of Representatives. The legislation would create a NOAA-centered National

Climate Service to integrate the federal government's climate services, serve as a clearinghouse for national and regional data on the impacts of climate change, and deliver relevant and scientifically-accurate information to end-users and decision-makers who will increasingly be faced with a need to adapt strategically to the changing climate. A National Climate Service would provide a single point of contact for other federal agencies and stakeholders who are interested in climate information.

Two weeks before, NCAR Director Eric Barron testified before the Subcommittee on Energy and Environment within the House Committee on Science and Technology on the findings and recommendations of the NOAA Scientific Advisory Board report "Options for Developing a National Climate Service," which was published by the coordinating committee that Barron chaired. Barron's testimony was well-received, and the legislation that the Committee approved incorporated several of the recommendations of the report, including an amendment to coordinate inter-agency collaboration and White House level supervision through the Office of Science and Technology Policy.

"Weather and climate impact almost everything we do – they influence our demand for energy, the growth of crops, and the availability of water. Every year we allocate significant funding for disaster assistance, most of these disasters are climate and weather related," said bill author and Committee Chairman Bart Gordon (D-TN). "We must enable governments and our communities and businesses to prepare for these weather and climate events and to develop adaptation and response plans to adjust to the changes we face. NOAA has been expanding its capabilities to provide more information about climate in response to these needs. It is now time to take the next step."

Chairman Gordon would like to see H.R. 2407 incorporated into H.R. 2454, the "American Clean Energy and Security Act," as known as the Waxman-Markey climate change bill, when it comes to the House floor for a vote in the full chamber. Speaker Pelosi has said this is likely to happen before month-long August recess. If the House fails to pass H.R. 2454, however, Gordon has said he is prepared to offer H.R. 2407 as a stand-alone bill.

Another National Climate Service bill, the "Climate and Ocean Research and Coordination Act of 2009" was introduced by Rep. Madeleine Bordallo (D-Guam) on June 3. Bordallo's bill would create an inter-agency National Climate Enterprise akin to a National Climate Service. Among the virtues of the Bordallo's bill are its emphasis on inter-agency synergy and on non-federal contributors, which will be a key to the success of any National Climate Service. In addition, it is coupled with a "NOAA Organic Act," which would codify the structure of NOAA for the first time and allow it to reorganize as it grows to meet the increasing demands of climate change. The first recommendation of the "Options for Developing a National Climate Service" report is that a NOAA re-organization will be necessary for a successful National Climate Service.