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Global Warming: Congress Still Stalled, States and Cities Act

BARTON REPPERT

Back in 1992, Representative Henry A. Waxman (D-CA) introduced legislation aimed at dealing with global climate change by controlling emissions of greenhouse gases. Fourteen years later, the California Democrat and other environmentally conscious lawmakers are still waiting for Congress to act and set US national policy on global warming.

On 20 June 2006, Waxman and 12 cosponsors launched another effort, introducing the Safe Climate Act (H.R. 5642). "Global warming is the greatest environmental challenge of our time, and we have a short window in which to act to prevent profound changes in the climate system," Waxman declared. "Unless we seize the opportunity to act now, our legacy to our children and grandchildren will be an unstable and dangerous planet." He added that "it's simply too late for legislative baby steps."

The Waxman legislation would cap US greenhouse gas emissions in 2010, and then gradually reduce them by 2 percent per year until 2020. After 2020, emissions would be required to fall by roughly 5 percent per year as more advanced technologies become available, enabling, for example, the production of biofuels from waste materials and the capture of carbon dioxide from power plants.

On the other side of Capitol Hill, on 20 July, Senators James Jeffords (I-VT) and Barbara Boxer (D-CA) introduced the Global Warming Pollution Reduction Act, a comparably ambitious bill aimed at reducing global warming pollutants by 80 percent by 2050. Jeffords said on the Senate floor, "Some will say this bill imposes requirements that ask too much of industry. Some will say that this bill contains requirements that we cannot easily meet. I say first of all that the costs of inaction vastly outweigh the costs of action, and that we have a responsibility to future generations not to leave the earth far worse off than we found it—with a fundamentally altered climate system."

The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), an environmental advocacy group based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, quickly urged its members across the country to contact their senators and representatives in support of

the Jeffords-Boxer and Waxman bills. However, senior staff members at UCS and at other influential environmental advocacy organizations, including the Sierra Club, have acknowledged that they do not expect either measure to pass the current Republican-controlled Congress. Indeed, in June 2005, a less comprehensive measure introduced by Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT)—the Climate Stewardship and Innovation Act, which called for a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions to 2000 levels by 2010—was defeated during Senate consideration of energy policy legislation.

While Congress remains gridlocked on global warming, some environmental advocates are viewing with hopeful anticipation the Supreme Court's decision on 26 June 2006 to hear a case concerning the Environmental Protection Agency's refusal to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. In 2003, 12 states, several cities, and more than a dozen environmental groups joined forces to challenge the agency's decision disavowing its jurisdiction under the Clean Air Act to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. The case was first heard in the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, where a panel voted 2-1 to let the agency's position stand. In 2005, the petitioners asked that the full court hear the case; the court decided 4-3 to deny the request, thus opening the way for the appeal to the Supreme Court.

Although global warming legislation is bottled up in Congress, and the Supreme Court has yet to decide on the case involving the Environmental Protection Agency, efforts aimed at curbing greenhouse gas emissions have been proceeding apace at the state and municipal levels.

On 15 August 2006, the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, a cooperative effort by several northeastern and mid-Atlantic state governments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from power plants, reached a milestone with the release of its "model rule." The rule details how the participating states—Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, and Vermont—will implement a "cap-

and-trade" program to limit carbon dioxide emissions.

On 30 August, California's Democrat-controlled legislature and its Republican governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, reached agreement on legislation that calls for a 25 percent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2020. Frances Beinecke, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council, said the next day that the California agreement was "a turning point in our fight to curb global warming[,]...the greatest environmental threat of our time."

Also, former president Bill Clinton announced on 1 August that the "Clinton Climate Initiative," sponsored by his Clinton Foundation, would assist the Large Cities Climate Leadership Group, chaired by the mayor of London and involving 22 of the world's largest cities, in efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase energy efficiency.

The Bush administration's basic position on global warming and greenhouse gas emissions was summarized by James Connaughton, chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, when he responded to questions from the public during an "Ask the White House" online interactive forum on 21 April 2006. "The President stated an ambitious goal in February 2002 to reduce the greenhouse gas intensity of our economy by 18 percent by 2012," Connaughton said, according to a White House transcript. "The term 'greenhouse gas intensity' applies to the amount of greenhouse gases emitted per unit of GDP [gross domestic product]. It is correct that greenhouse gas emissions are still rising. What we are aiming to do is first significantly slow the growth of emissions, then as the science justifies, stop it and then reverse it. That is exactly what happened with traditional air pollution such as carbon monoxide and sulfur dioxide over the last century.... We can expect the same outcome with greenhouse gas emissions."

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