

Obama calls for a price' on carbon emissions

Margaret Talev, McClatchy Newspapers, 6-3-10

WASHINGTON -- President Barack Obama said Wednesday that the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has hardened his resolve to impose "a price" on carbon emissions to drive private investment away from fossil fuels and toward clean energy.

Speaking at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, a city that turned to health care and technology after the collapse of the region's steel industry, Obama said he supports more domestic offshore drilling "only if it's used as a short-term solution while we transition to a clean energy economy."

He also said that he'd be personally involved in finding enough votes in Congress to pass legislation that limits carbon emissions and redirects the flow of private investment toward cleaner energy alternatives. That should go hand in hand with encouraging energy-efficient products, reducing tax breaks for oil companies, tapping natural gas reserves and expanding nuclear power, he said.

"The time has come to aggressively accelerate that transition. But the only way the transition to clean energy will succeed is if the private sector is fully invested in this future, if capital comes off the sidelines and the ingenuity of our entrepreneurs is unleashed," Obama said. "And the only way to do that is by finally putting a price on carbon pollution."

Obama didn't talk about the pocketbook implications of carbon limits, as in higher costs for consumers. He also didn't say which carbon-limit measures he thinks Congress can pass, and which should be delayed - a level of specificity that some activists want to hear from him.

The president said the BP oil spill reinforces the "inherent" risks to drilling several miles under the Earth's surface, "risks that are bound to increase the harder oil extraction becomes."

"An America run solely on fossil fuels should not be the vision we have for our children and our grandchildren," the president said.

Obama's policy remarks were also heavily tinged with politics. He faces declining public support as a result of the oil spill response and has an eye on Democrats' fate in November's congressional elections.

Obama defended deficit spending as necessary given the vulnerable economy, and said, "We cannot put on the brakes too quickly."

He also bashed Republicans for stonewalling most of his initiatives. He charged that "most have sat on the sidelines and shouted from the bleachers." He said the minority party's philosophy of less corporate regulation had given rise to every challenge now hobbling his administration, from rising health costs to the housing crisis and the oil spill, and argued against returning Republicans to the majority in Congress.

Republicans responded swiftly.

House Minority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio, released a statement from a Carnegie Mellon economist and adviser to Republicans, Allan Meltzer, calling on the president to "rein in the government and put the country on a path to future prosperity so we don't end up like Greece."

Obama acknowledged that a clean-energy proposal being pushed by Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., doesn't have the votes to pass, but added, "I intend to find them in the coming months."

Lawmakers are on recess until next week, but behind the scenes Democrats are worried that a compromise on climate and energy legislation is elusive, and advocates hope that Obama will energize the effort.

Kerry applauded Obama's remarks.

Kerry wants to put emission limits on electric utilities, major industries and transportation. Critics early on charged that his transportation provisions could amount to a gasoline tax.

Meanwhile, several other energy proposals are making their way through the Senate. The House of Representatives has passed its own energy bill last year that includes the "cap and trade" approach to reducing emissions as a way to reduce global warming.

Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., plans to unveil a proposal next week as "a main alternative to the divisive cap-and-trade approach," his office said.