

# Lawmakers seek to compete with Chinese over key resource

**Manuel Quinones, Environment & Energy Publishing, 6-8-11**

A bipartisan group of Wyoming and Oregon lawmakers is urging the Obama administration to take a tougher stand against China over soda ash -- a key resource used in making glass, chemicals and detergents. They are also pushing legislation designed to enable U.S. producers to better compete globally.

This week, Oregon Democratic Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley joined Wyoming Republicans John Barrasso and Mike Enzi in introducing legislation to keep the royalty rate for soda ash low at 2 percent until 2016. Without congressional action, the rate would revert to the pre-2006 level of 6 percent, something bill sponsors say would hurt the U.S. industry. China has been actively -- some say unfairly -- promoting its own soda ash production.

"I've been underground with these workers, many of the workers try to get those jobs for their children because of the benefits and the wages," Barrasso said in an interview about the legislation. "It's an important part of our economy."

Reps. Cynthia Lummis (R-Wyo.) and David Wu (D-Ore.) introduced a companion bill ([H.R. 1192](#)) in the House back in March. And last month, a group of 10 lawmakers, including members of the Wyoming and Oregon delegations, sent a letter to U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk and Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, who is President Obama's nominee for ambassador to China, urging them to pressure China on the issue.

"China's state-supported soda ash industry is the largest in the world and this policy is harmful to its international competitors, particularly U.S. soda ash manufacturers," the letter said. It also urged Locke and Kirk to bring up the issue during bilateral trade talks and at the highest levels in the Chinese government.

The Green River Basin in Sweetwater County, Wyo., has the world's largest deposit of trona, a mineral mined for soda ash. Wyoming used to be the world's leader in soda ash production, but China has been ahead for several years.

The government there is supporting the industry through a tax rebate to help fuel economic growth and exports. Dennis Kostick, soda ash expert at the U.S. Geological Survey said China has been exporting its soda ash to countries in Asia where the United States has been dominant.

"If we don't stand up for the pillars of our export-based manufacturers like the soda ash industry, and the U.S. workers employed through the soda ash supply chain, we cannot seriously contend we are doing everything we can to support U.S. exports," the letter said.

While soda ash production occurs primarily in Wyoming and, to a lesser extent, California, Oregon lawmakers are keen on the issue because the industry helps support dock worker jobs in Portland, Ore.

Another bargaining chip for U.S. soda ash advocates is that China's production is largely synthetic, a process Kostick said is more energy and labor intensive. In their letter, lawmakers said, "China should live up to its repeated pledge to discourage the expansion of highly-polluting and energy-intensive sectors such as its own soda ash industry."