

Bay Area congressman urges ban on fossil fuels extraction from federal lands

Richard Halstead, Bay Area News Group, 2-12-16

Rep. Jared Huffman introduced legislation in the House of Representatives on Thursday that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by banning all new coal, oil and natural gas drilling on federally owned lands and waters from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Circle.

"This is in response to a real outpouring of support for this cause that I have seen, not just from my constituents in the north coast of California, but from all over the country," said Huffman, D-San Rafael.

He spoke about the new House version of the "Keep It In the Ground Act" during a teleconference that included prominent national environmental leaders including Bill McKibben, co-founder of 350.org; Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club; and Tara Houska, tribal attorney for Honor The Earth. The group 350.org has organized large, nonviolent demonstrations around the world aimed at stopping climate change.

McKibben said much has changed since 2012 when he wrote an article in Rolling Stone magazine that said 80 percent of fossil fuel reserves will have to be left in the ground if the increase in global temperature is to be kept below 2 degrees Celsius -- a critical tipping point.

"It's no longer people writing in Rolling Stone" who are talking about this issue, McKibben said. "Now it's the governor of the Bank of England, or the head of the International Monetary Fund or the head of the World Bank."

Huffman's bill, companion legislation to a bill introduced in the Senate last November, states that a global temperature increase of 2 degrees Celsius will lead to "increased droughts, rising seas, mass extinctions, heat waves, desertification, wildfires, acidifying oceans, significant economic disruption, and security threats."

Huffman said, "We're hearing studies that in California alone rising sea levels caused by climate change could drown out low-lying coastal areas near Los Angeles, inundate over 5 percent of San Francisco and submerge a majority of important habitat and farmland of the San Joaquin delta.

"So we've got to get much more aggressive in this fight against climate change," he said, "because we know what we put off today will only make the cost and damage greater for our children tomorrow."

Since winning the fight over the Keystone XL pipeline, 350.org has focused much of its attention on the "keep it in the ground" effort. McKibben said the organization has several actions planned for May to highlight the issue.

"I've been amazed to see how quickly the politics of this has begun to shift," McKibben said.

As an example, he noted that Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton said last week she now supports banning fossil fuel extraction on public lands.

"No future extraction. I agree with that," she replied when asked about the issue after the Democratic debate in New Hampshire on Feb. 4. According to The Hill, Clinton's campaign spokesman, Jesse Ferguson, subsequently qualified that, however, saying Clinton believes the U.S. should be "on a long-term path to a future where there is no extraction of fossil fuels on public lands."

Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., Clinton's rival for the presidential nomination, introduced the Senate version of Keep It In the Ground in November, together with the bill's author Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore. The bill's other co-sponsors in the Senate included Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., and Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass.

Previously, Clinton had rejected calls for her to support a ban on fossil fuel extraction on federal land; President Obama has also resisted calling for a ban.

Responding to the new House bill, Tom Montgomery, chairman of the Marin Republican Party, said, "My concern is they're cutting off the supply before they've replaced the source. We need to have alternative sources before we cut off the supply of these resources."

The Sierra Club's Brune said the Keep It In the Ground Act "will expand on President Obama's recent action to put a moratorium on new and expanded coal leasing on public lands."

Companies are continuing to mine reserves already under lease, which is estimated to be sufficient to maintain current levels of production for about two decades.

Huffman said while the movement to battle climate change is gathering momentum, the effort has suffered a couple of recent setbacks. He said just this week the U.S. Supreme Court delayed implementation of the Environmental Protection Agency's directive to states to reduce greenhouse gas emissions created by electric power plants. The order would have resulted in the closing of hundreds of coal-fired plants. Huffman also lamented a December deal on an omnibus tax bill that repealed a 40-year ban on U.S. crude oil exporting.

"This law has a potential to create a race to the bottom, where American oil and gas companies will drill more wherever they have access," Huffman said. "It underscores the importance of this bill we're introducing today."