

Yale Finds Climate-Change Concern Wanes in U.S.

Daniel Whitten and Kim Chipman, Bloomberg News Service, 1-28-10

Senators trying to salvage climate-change legislation this year are circulating a scaled-back plan to reduce emissions, as a Yale University poll showed public concern about global warming is declining.

Among proposals being discussed to achieve President Barack Obama's goal of capping carbon-dioxide pollution to combat warming is a "hybrid" approach combining a tax on carbon emissions from refineries and emissions limits for other industries, according to Senator Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican.

A so-called cap-and-trade bill that passed the House of Representatives last year with support from Obama has stalled in the Senate. A poll released today by Yale and George Mason University found U.S. concern about global warming has "dropped sharply." Of those polled, 50 percent are somewhat or very worried about global warming, down from 63 percent in the fall of 2008.

"Despite growing scientific evidence that global warming will have serious impacts worldwide, public opinion is moving in the opposite direction," said Anthony Leiserowitz, director of the Yale Project on Climate Change, in a statement on the poll.

Opponents of the cap-and-trade bill, including billionaire Warren Buffett, say the emissions-trading program aimed at curbing greenhouse gases would amount to a burdensome tax on consumers.

'Looking at Everything'

"We're looking at everything," Senator John Kerry told reporters on Capitol Hill yesterday. The Massachusetts Democrat is working with Graham and Senator Joseph Lieberman, a Connecticut independent, to craft bipartisan energy and climate legislation.

"The emissions standards will have to be meaningful or you won't get environmental support, but they also have to be better for business than the current construct," Graham said.

Graham is pushing for provisions that would promote nuclear power, increase access to offshore oil and gas reserves and promote cleaner production of electricity from coal power plants.

Oil refineries were treated unfairly in the cap-and-trade legislation, Graham said. Rex Tillerson, chief executive officer of Exxon Mobil Corp., the biggest U.S. oil company, has called for a carbon tax. In a speech in Washington in October, he supported a hybrid approach like the one Graham suggested.

Utility-Only Option

One option under review would be to include only electric utilities in a cap-and-trade system, K. Whitney Stanco, an analyst in Washington for the research firm Concept Capital said in an interview today. Such an approach wouldn't pass Congress without acceptance from power companies and would have to deal with the rising electricity prices manufacturers would pay, Stanco said.

"A utility-only approach has a better chance than an economy-wide cap-and-trade plan, but I still think it only has a 30 percent chance of getting done," Stanco said.

Scientists say greenhouse-gas emissions from smokestacks, tailpipes and other sources could lead to dangerous

climate change. Obama says such fossil-fuel pollution also needs to be cut in order to remake the country's energy economy and wean the U.S. from imported fuel.

State of the Union

Environmentalists urged Obama to say in his State of the Union address tonight that he is standing by energy legislation that incorporates a cap on carbon emissions.

"It's very important for the president to send a signal that he continues to support comprehensive climate legislation," Frances Beinecke, head of the New York-based Natural Resources Defense Council, said in an interview.

Carol Browner, Obama's top adviser on energy and the environment, said today that she is "very heartened" by the efforts of Kerry, Lieberman and Graham, and the White House is waiting to see what the group can craft.

Kerry, Graham and Lieberman met last week with White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel and U.S. Chamber of Commerce President Tom Donohue to seek a compromise on climate-change and energy legislation.

The three men met on Capitol Hill yesterday with Senators Maria Cantwell, a Washington Democrat, and Susan Collins, a Maine Republican.

Cantwell and Collins have proposed a bill to limit participation in a carbon market to companies that have emissions, barring traders such as investment banks.

Price on Carbon

"I respect it because it has the same goal as we have, which is to do something about global warming," Lieberman said. "It does put a price on carbon."

Senator Barbara Boxer, a California Democrat and sponsor of the cap-and-trade bill in the Senate, said "incremental" steps may be needed. Lawmakers have proposed adopting certain energy provisions as part of jobs legislation.

"When we have the 60 votes for cap-and-trade that's when we would go, but until we have that, we can't just do nothing," Boxer said in an interview. "We have to keep working."

Kerry, Graham and Lieberman are trying to hold on to energy incentives that could win votes if included in a climate-change bill.

"I don't think an energy-only bill is the right way to do it, and I certainly hope that is not the compromise," Lieberman said.

The poll conducted by Yale of New Haven, Connecticut, and George Mason of Fairfax, Virginia, was taken from Dec. 24 to Jan 3 and had a margin of error of plus-or-minus 3 percentage points.