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Valley environmentalists tally costs of waiting to address global warming

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"It's a very disappointing decision," said John Majercak, associate director of the Northampton office of the Center for Ecological Technology, a nonprofit group that helps homeowners and businesses improve energy efficiency. "It's becoming clearer and clearer that if we don't act now, it's going to be even harder to do anything further down the road."

In late July, Senate Democrats, led by Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada and John Kerry of Massachusetts, announced that despite months of negotiations, they could not muster any Republican support for a bill that sought, among other things, to place caps on greenhouse gas emissions across U.S. industry.

"We've always known from day one that to pass comprehensive energy reform, you've got to have 60 votes," Kerry, a principal author of the legislation, told the Associated Press. "As we stand here today, we don't have one Republican vote."

With Sen. Joe Lieberman, the Connecticut independent, Kerry had spent some 18 months meeting with colleagues, environmentalists and business leaders to craft and promote the bill. Initially, Republican Lindsey Graham of South Carolina had been involved in the discussions, but he withdrew his support in May, claiming Reid was playing politics with the bill.

Majercak and other environmentalists say fighting climate change and revamping the nation's energy policies should not be a partisan issue.

"Putting a price on carbon would seem to be a really good way to combine the best efforts of government and private industry," Majercak said. "Government develops the guidelines (for capping carbon emissions) and the marketplace figures out how to put it in practice."

House measure

Last year, the House passed such legislation, known as the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009, that called for reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020, and to 83 percent below those levels by 2050.

Those limits would be obtained by basically creating a business in greenhouse gases. Polluters

such as power plants and oil refineries would have to buy credits to cover their emissions, while small businesses and farmers could sell "offsets" for things they didn't emit. Wall Street, meantime, could turn those commodities into a new market, ideally spurring new jobs and investments in alternative energy.

House Republicans, however, bitterly opposed the bill, saying it would ruin the economy and saddle taxpayers with huge new energy costs. Senate Republicans have taken a similar line with the bill Kerry and Lieberman co-sponsored.

But Stephen Long, director of government relations for the Massachusetts chapter of the Nature Conservancy, says both the House and Senate bills drew support from "an unprecedented coalition" of industry leaders, business groups, environmental organizations, agricultural interests and others who believe revamping the nation's energy policy is vital not just for fighting climate change but making the country more secure.

"This bill really had bipartisan backing from many diverse groups and people who recognize we can create jobs, decrease our reliance on foreign oil from unstable countries, and improve our future by reducing our greenhouse gas emissions," Long said.

Long points to sobering recent studies, such as a report by the National Academy of Sciences that humans are changing the atmosphere and oceans to such an extent that the planet is entering a new geological epoch, called the "Anthropocene" - an era the Academy believes is likely to be characterized by increased forest fires in the American West, reduced river flows, and steady rises in sea level, among other changes.

As well, the National Oceanic and Air Administration says that through June, 2010 has been the hottest year ever on record, with recent dramatic weather events such as searing temperatures and wildfires in Russia and horrendous flooding in Pakistan and China. The combined death toll from the latter has topped an estimated 2,200 people.

Ray Bradley, director of the Climate System Research Center at the University of Massachusetts, says the country's polarized politics has not only stalled the Senate climate bill, it's prevented the U.S. from taking a leading role in combating global warming and advancing the issue.

"The international community is waiting for us to commit to this, but we're not doing it," said Bradley, a leading researcher on climate change. As a consequence, he adds, the U.S. is falling behind other nations such as China that are making serious investments in research and development of alternative energies.

Chris Bathurst, director of Clean Water Action/New England, says his group is "obviously disappointed" with the lack of progress in the Senate climate bill but adds, "We're not giving up on this - we're going to keep pushing for it."

Though some Democrats have blamed Senate Republicans for stonewalling the bill, others have faulted the Obama administration, saying the White House didn't push hard enough on the issue. In a July 23 editorial, the New York Times said Obama could have used the Gulf of Mexico oil spill to dramatize the need for overhauling the nation's energy policy, but he "never fully committed to the fight."

For his part, Bathurst, of Northampton, said he's not interested in pointing fingers and isn't privy to the behind-the-scenes political drama that shaped the Senate bill, though he allows the issue

has become more complicated politically as November elections draw closer.

Kerry and Senate Democrats have proposed a more stripped-down bill that would, among other things, only seek to cap emissions from electric utilities, the goal being to gain at least a few Republican votes after Congress' August recess. Whatever bill emerges will at least be a starting point, Bathurst said.

"Eventually, this country will have to address global warming," Bathurst said, noting that climate change could well produce heavier annual rainfall in the Valley that could ruin crops and compromise water quality. "We cannot afford to lose the jobs and technological growth that will come out of new energy and climate policies."

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