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Global warming 'turning point'

Bipartisan climate change measure that could slash emissions by 60 percent introduced in U.S. Senate.

By David Whitney - Bee Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON – With the introduction Thursday of broad legislation to curb global warming, a key committee is hoping to move the bill for Senate consideration by the end of the year.

"Today will be remembered as the turning point in the fight against global warming," Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., said on the Senate floor, hailing the introduction of the compromise bill sponsored by Sens. John Warner, R-Va., and Joe Lieberman, a Connecticut independent.

Boxer made combating global warming her top priority after she became chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee in January. She said, however, that she would wait until she had enough bipartisan support before trying to move any legislation through her committee.

Boxer said she will use the Lieberman-Warner bill as the template for committee action, even though it isn't her "gold standard" – California's groundbreaking effort to reduce emissions by 80 percent before 2050.

The Lieberman-Warner bill could slash emissions by 60 percent. While it would establish a national program under which carbon emission credits could be bought and sold among industries trying to meet the standard, it initially would assign most of the credits to companies based on their past pollution history.

"We are not among those gushing about this bill," said Frank O'Donnell, president of Clear Air Watch, an environmental group. "This is a political concession to coal-burning companies."

Other environmental groups, while emphasizing the need to strengthen the bill, were more complimentary of the progress the Lieberman-Warner bill represented.

On the Senate floor, introduction of the retooled Lieberman-Warner bill was portrayed as a major, if uncertain, breakthrough during an hour-long series of speeches and exchanges.

"This bill does what we have to do," Lieberman said. "It doesn't do everything some would like to do."

Warner was more sanguine, calling it a "starting point."

"This is going to be a long, contentious effort," he said.

In addition to Warner and Lieberman, there were six other co-sponsors: Republicans Elizabeth Dole of North Carolina, Norm Coleman of Minnesota and Susan Collins of Maine, and Democrats Tom Harkin of Iowa, Benjamin Cardin of Maryland and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota.

Oklahoma Sen. James Inhofe, the senior Republican on the committee and a global warming skeptic, sought to slow down the bill.

He asked for multiple hearings on the legislation, saying the annual costs of the bill are likely to exceed \$3,500 per family of four.

"This is 10 times the largest tax increase over the last three decades," Inhofe said.

But Lieberman, chair of the committee's global warming subcommittee, said there would be a single hearing next week and that his panel would then begin to add the finishing touches to prepare the measure for full committee action in November. Boxer's panel has conducted 18 global warming hearings so far this year.

In the House of Representatives, meanwhile, the Energy and Commerce Committee issued a white paper earlier this month on how it saw global warming legislation developing there. As with the Senate version, House leaders envision a so-called cap-and-trade bill that would cut across all segments of the economy – power generation, transportation, industrial, commercial and residential – to slash emissions by 60 percent to 80 percent by 2050.

At least out of the starting gate, it appears that nothing in the Senate bill or House white paper would stop California from proceeding under its stricter global warming legislation or prevent other states from enacting similar, tougher laws.

Despite all of the happy talk Thursday, enactment of a tough global warming bill will be difficult, especially if, as now seems certain, the effort slips into 2008 with the presidential campaign under way and congressional elections looming.

An earlier showdown could set the stage.

The Democratic-controlled Congress is battling with the White House over an energy bill that would increase car and truck mileage standards, also an element in the global warming battle. President Bush has threatened a veto.

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