



CLIMATE: Oil spill becomes argument for Senate bill passage (05/13/2010)

Anne C. Mulkern, E&E reporter

The Gulf of Mexico oil spill turned into a political rallying cry yesterday as groups eager to see Congress pass climate legislation pointed to the disaster.

In statement after statement reacting to the release of the bill from Sens. John Kerry (D-Mass.) and Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.), environmental groups prominently cited the oil spill as a reason new climate policies are needed.

"The deafening wakeup call of the Deepwater oil disaster reminds us yet again that it is past time for America to end its dangerous dependence on oil and dirty fossil fuels and begin the transition to clean, renewable energy," said Maggie Fox, president and CEO of Alliance for Climate Protection.

Nature Conservancy President and CEO Mark Tercek said that "the massive oil spill fouling the Gulf of Mexico is a stark and sobering reminder of all that is at stake -- clean water, productive fisheries, vibrant communities and wildlife -- as we take decisive steps toward a clean energy future."

The oil spill as reason for climate legislation is the latest in a long series of arguments environmental groups and others have put forward. They have struggled to find exactly the right images and slogans to persuade people that Congress needs to act quickly. They used the term global warming, then switched to climate change. They talked about melting ice caps, then pointed to the imperiled polar bear. In the last two years they have shifted to arguing that new policies can buttress the economy and create "green" jobs.

The April 20 BP PLC oil spill in the Gulf is tangible, they said. There are pictures. And that makes it resonate with people.

"The public finally gets the consequences of the current system," said Alex Posorske, field and communications manager for 1Sky, a coalition of environmental groups, businesses, religious groups, health organizations, social justice and military leaders and others. "When you've got what's threatening to be potentially the biggest [U.S.] ecological disaster ... that tends to wake people up a little."

Environmental groups were quick to say they would prefer not to have an oil spill to talk about and that they have many other reasons for wanting climate policies other than the risks involved with oil drilling. Some statements on the Kerry-Lieberman legislation mention wildlife, a chance to revitalize the manufacturing sector and the need for diversified power sources.

But in the messaging arena, the spill is a potential game-changer.

"The disaster in the Gulf just underscores why we need a new clean energy policy," League of Conservation Voters President Gene Karpinski told E&E. "The direction the bill pushes us in to put a cap on emissions and put a price on carbon is the way to go. I think the public demand for change, the obvious need for change, has just become more clear with the Gulf spill."

Two analysts, however, said they doubted talking about the oil spill would help win passage for the bill in an election year. As well, there were questions about whether it was an appropriate incident to point to in talking about climate change.

"I don't really see as the two are as directly related as [environmentalists] would argue," said Charles Ebinger, director of the Energy Security Initiative at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. "It's hard for me to see how the Gulf oil spill really directly translates to galvanizing people concerned about climate change."

People might think about how much gasoline they use, he said, but probably not about larger climate policies. As for the legislation, Ebinger said, it "will be dead on arrival."

Talking about the oil spill harkens back to when environmentalists decried nuclear power following the 1979 partial core meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear generating station in Pennsylvania, said Ken Green, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a think tank that favors free market policies.

"It's straight out of the playbook," Green said. "You arouse people's passions," getting them to act quickly. After Three Mile Island, he said, the country moved away from nuclear power and toward coal, which environmentalists also dislike.

Green said environmentalists also do not acknowledge that enacting new policies is not a solution. "There's not a single serious energy scholar or student who thinks there is any alternative to using oil," he said.

Environmentalists said they acknowledge it will take time to move away from oil but that it needs to start and the government needs to drive the change. The oil spill helps explain that, some said.

"It makes it a lot more clear to talk about the need for clean energy now than three weeks ago," said Sierra Club spokesman David Willett.

"The energy we rely upon comes with some very high costs," Willett added. "A lot of times we tend to forget what those costs are."

There is a connection between climate change and the oil spill, several said.

"I wouldn't say it's apples and oranges," said Eric Haxthausen, the Nature Conservancy's director of U.S. climate policy. "It's more like talking about different parts of the apple tree."

The economy depends upon the extraction of fossil fuels and when they are burned that produces carbon, Haxthausen said. "Oil is not a representation of climate change, but it's a representation of one of the motivations that's driving this bill," he said.

Many environmental groups also linked the oil spill with criticism of the bill provision allowing some expanded offshore drilling.

"The Deepwater Drilling Disaster will be the largest environmental disaster in our nation's history, if it is not already," the environmental group Oceana said in its statement. "Yet this bill promotes additional, unnecessary and dangerous offshore drilling. Promoting expanded offshore drilling in a bill designed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions made no sense before the disaster and makes even less sense now."