

Climate bill expected to emerge from committee in Dec.

Nov. 16 -- Barring an insurrection by Democrats, an economy wide, cap-and-trade climate change bill should emerge from the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee in early December.

While committee chair Barbara Boxer initially wanted the bipartisan bill to be debated on the Senate floor before Congress's Christmas break, it now seems more likely that will happen in January or February.

Even though some Republicans have accused the California Democrat of rushing America's Climate Security Act through committee, Boxer is sticking to a Dec. 5 markup date. Deliberations could well be lengthy enough to spill over to Dec. 6. Her committee has devoted more than 20 hearings to the issue of global warming.

As the majority party, Democrats have a 10-9 committee advantage. Plus, Sen. John Warner, a Virginia Republican, is cosponsoring the landmark legislation with Sen. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn.

During a Nov. 15 hearing, the final one before the markup, Boxer praised the recent supportive efforts of three Western governors. Arnold Schwarzenegger, R-Calif., Jon Huntsman Jr., R-Utah and Brian Schweitzer, D-Mont., are all appearing in 30-second television ads urging Congress to act on curbing heat-trapping gases.

Environmental Defense is underwriting the campaign, featuring the governors outdoors in their respective states. Fred Krupp, president of the advocacy group, offered testimony in favor of the Warner-Lieberman bill at the latest hearing. He was one of five witnesses.

"For us to be so late on this issue is a real stain on this Congress," a frustrated Boxer said after Republican Sens. George Voinovich of Ohio, David Vitter of Louisiana and James Inhofe of Oklahoma complained that the bill is too costly for average Americans because it will cause energy prices to skyrocket, force companies and jobs overseas, and give a competitive advantage to India and China. "Let's not make a false argument that we need more time à that means doing nothing."

Missouri Republican Kit Bond told Boxer he was pushing for a better bill, not a delay.

"For heaven's sake, let's not do harm," said Bond, who fears an unaffordable price tag.

The measure that advanced out of Lieberman's environmental subcommittee on a 4-3 vote Nov. 1 introduces a cap-and-trade system covering power plants, transportation and factories. Those sectors account for 75 percent of the nation's emissions of heat trapping gases. The bill also strengthens energy efficiency standards. Caps would begin at the 2005 emissions level in 2012. The goal is to reduce emissions 15 percent below current levels by 2020.

"The worst thing we can do for our economy and our environment is to do nothing at all," Krupp said in his testimony. "The second worst thing we can do for our economy is to delay."

Putting off the start from 2012 to 2014 would require that emissions fall twice as quickly annually to reach the 2020 target, Krupp said. Emissions would have to be reduced 23 percent.

The bill establishes what's called a Carbon Market Efficiency Board modeled after the Securities Exchange Commission. Members would gauge market activity and intervene if unexpected problems arise. It also gives Congress the ability to tighten emissions caps if scientific models suggest adjustments are necessary.

It's no secret Democrats want to have an acceptable bill to curb global warming in hand by December when world leaders meet for post-Kyoto Protocol discussions in Bali, Indonesia. The Kyoto pact, which the United States refused to sign, expires in five years.

Krupp and Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, both testified that by leading the way, the United States would encourage India, China and other rapidly developing countries to follow suit.

"Is there an easier way to do this?" asked Voinovich, who referred to a cap and trade system as a "gigantic new regime."

"[This bill] will create more jobs than we lose," Claussen said, pointing out that it includes economic relief.

For instance, it funds carbon capture and sequestration technology, and also gives to energy-intensive industries a break by allowing free allocation of pollution credits until 2036.

Research by the Clean Air Task Force shows that prices of natural gas and electricity would indeed increase by 2030. Monthly bills for consumers would actually drop, however, because use would decrease due to a rise in energy efficiency.

The bill also sets aside money for energy rebates for low- and middle-income citizens, and provides additional funding to existing programs that help the poor weatherize their homes and pay for heating fuel.

"Either we're going to have a do-something committee or a do-nothing committee," Boxer said. "The bottom line is we need to do something. The people want us to do something, and they want us to do something good."