Bush-Backed Emissions Bill Fails to Reach Senate Floor

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Published: March 10, 2005

WASHINGTON, March 9 - Efforts to pass a bill to control power-plant emissions crumbled in the Senate on Wednesday amid charges of partisan intransigence. The day's developments sidelined - and possibly doomed - action this year on the legislative centerpiece of President Bush's environmental policy.

As a result of a 9-to-9 vote by the Environment and Public Works Committee, the bill, which deals with sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and mercury, will not advance to the full Senate. Committee leaders have been trying for more than a month to break the deadlock on the measure, known as the Clear Skies Act of 2005, which generally reflected a split along party lines.

Much of the debate over the bill conveyed stark differences between Republicans and Democrats over how to balance environmental improvement and economic stability. The complicated measure would affect 1,300 power plants across the country, the fuels they use, the number of workers they hire and consumer costs - not to mention air quality.

On environmental issues, the sides differed on two major points: whether or even how the first significant overhaul of the Clean Air Act in 15 years should address carbon dioxide and whether the goals of the bill represented a weakening or enhancement of the Clean Air Act.

Supporters said the bill, which they said would have cut power-plant emissions by 70 percent, would help bring most of the country into compliance with federal air quality standards by 2016. They also said that by setting specific standards, the measure would end costly lawsuits that inevitably test any new environmental initiative.

Opponents argued that the measure did not go far enough or fast enough to cut emissions. They also said the bill would ultimately prove inadequate if it did not also curb emissions of carbon dioxide, a heat-trapping gas that many scientists say accounts for global warming.

President Bush made passage of this legislation a priority when it was first introduced in 2002. Speaking Wednesday on energy policy in Columbus, Ohio, he did not mention the vote, saying, "To protect the environment, to protect jobs here in Ohio and around our country, Congress needs to get a good Clear Skies bill to my desk now."

He did allude to new emission-reduction regulations for the eastern half of the country
that the Environmental Protection Agency is about to issue, saying, "This'll help you." Rules covering sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides are to be released Thursday and those for mercury are expected next Thursday.

"These rules provide some of the same benefits as Clear Skies," he added. "But they are not a substitute for effective legislation."

Senator James M. Inhofe, the Oklahoma Republican who is chairman of the environment committee, said the bill was "killed by the environmental extremists who care more about continuing the litigation-friendly status quo and making a political statement on CO2 than they do about reducing air pollution."

Mr. Inhofe, who considers global warming "a hoax," predicted that the full Senate would not support caps on carbon dioxide, asserting that Democrats were determined not to allow a Republican president a major environmental victory.

Democrats, he said, were "putting a far-left political fund-raising effort over the health and well-being of America's children and our nation's environment."

Mr. Inhofe was joined by the eight other Republicans on the committee in voting for the bill.

But Senator James M. Jeffords, the Vermont independent who is the committee's ranking member, said that the Clear Skies bill "is no compromise; it's a giant step backward."

Mr. Jeffords, who joined seven Democrats and Senator Lincoln Chafee, Republican of Rhode Island, in opposing the bill, added, "This bill allows giant corporate utilities to avoid compliance and stops the enforcement of our existing clean air laws."

This was Mr. Inhofe's fourth bid to move the Clear Skies bill to the full Senate. Three previous committee votes were postponed when a tie seemed certain and committee members expressed a willingness to negotiate a compromise. Leading the efforts were two friends from their days as governors, Senator George V. Voinovich, an Ohio Republican who co-sponsored the bill with Mr. Inhofe, and Senator Thomas R. Carper, Democrat of Delaware. They met nine times since early February to narrow differences.

The talks ended after Mr. Voinovich said Republican compromises received no Democratic response, and Mr. Carper said his requests for more timely data from the Environmental Protection Agency were ignored.

"How would you like to find yourself in the ring with nobody to box?" Mr. Voinovich asked after the vote. "We've spent hours in conversations, and all I get is silence. If they're sincere, they should come back and say, 'Here's what we'll do.'"

Mr. Carper, as well as other committee Democrats, said they sought more information, including a detailed environmental and economic analysis of the Clear Skies bill and several competing bills, before they would address Republican concerns.

"I love George like a brother," Mr. Carper said. "But this is a steeper learning curve for me, and it's more complicated when E.P.A. doesn't respond."

Mr. Carper and others expressed optimism that a compromise might be reached later this year, but Mr. Voinovich said it could happen only if Democrats acknowledged the Republican compromises and softened their stance.

"As far as I'm concerned, we're nowhere," Mr. Voinovich said. "Until something comes
back, I'm not going to spend any more time on it."