Senate Democrats turn focus to Gulf spill response

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Senate Democrats hope to pass a narrow energy bill next week that responds to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and takes steps to improve energy efficiency, after abandoning plans for a sweeping measure that caps greenhouse gases blamed for global warming.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said no Republican senator was willing to back a comprehensive energy and climate bill, a development he called "terribly disappointing" and even dangerous.

"It's easy to count to 60," Reid told reporters Thursday. "I could do it by the time I was in eighth grade. My point is this, we know where we are. We know we don't have the votes."

Still, the Nevada Democrat said he was optimistic about the more limited measure, which would crack down on oil giant BP PLC, boost energy efficient homes and provide incentives to convert many of the nation's large trucks from diesel fuel to natural gas.

"Number one, we're going to hold BP accountable to ensure that they clean up their mess," Reid said. "Hopefully, we can stop (accidents) from ever happening, but if they do, there will be a process to move forward."

While far from comprehensive, the new bill "is a step forward," Reid said.

Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., lead sponsor of the now-abandoned climate bill, said he was not giving up on efforts to cap heat-trapping carbon emissions. He noted that it took more than two decades for Congress to approve a health care bill championed by his friend and fellow Massachusetts senator, the late Ted Kennedy.

"This is not going to take that long. This is not going to take close to that long. I am absolutely confident that as the American people make their voices heard, and as our colleagues go home and listen to them we're going to grow in our ability to be able to pass this," Kerry said.

Still, the climate bill faces bleak prospects.

Democrats have been trying for more than a year to pass a plan that charges power plants, manufacturers and other large polluters for their carbon dioxide emissions, the leading contributor to global warming.

Last year, the House voted 219-212 for a "cap and trade" plan featuring economic

incentives to reduce carbon emissions from power plants, vehicles and other sources.

Republicans slammed the bill as a "national energy tax" and jobs killer, arguing that the costs would be passed on to consumers in the form of higher electricity bills and fuel costs that would lead manufacturers to take their factories overseas.

In recent weeks, Senate Democrats floated a more modest approach that would limit the carbon tax to the electricity sector. That plan, which drew support from the White House and words of encouragement from Republican Sen. Olympia Snowe of Maine, was never formally proposed. But it, too, failed to attract the 60 votes needed to advance it in the 100-member Senate.

White House energy adviser Carol Browner said President Barack Obama continues to support a comprehensive bill that includes a cap on carbon emissions, but said the president also supports Reid's decision to go forward with a narrower bill. For Obama the effort has ranked behind only overhauling the nation's health care system and its financial regulations on his list of priorities.

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., said Reid and Kerry were wise to withdraw the carbon tax, which many environmental groups say is the best way to combat global climate change.

"If you can't get 60 votes for a package, there's no reason to bring it to the floor," Nelson, who opposed the carbon cap legislation. He said he might support the more limited energy package, but wanted to see the details.

Larry Schweiger, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation, said the Senate was on the brink of a colossal failure.

"Too many senators are listening to polluters instead of the American public," he said. "Too many senators have learned nothing from the Gulf disaster and the high price we pay when oil lobbyists dictate our energy laws."

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