House Blocks Obama's Carbon Curbs

MATTHEW DALY, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Aiming at the heart of President Barack Obama's strategy for fighting climate change, the Republican-controlled House voted Thursday to block the administration's plan to limit carbon pollution from new power plants.

The bill targets Obama's proposal for the Environmental Protection Agency to set the first national limits on heat-trapping carbon pollution from future power plants. It's part of the GOP's election-year strategy to fight back against what Republicans call a "war on coal" by the Obama administration.

The bill passed by a 229-183 vote. Ten Democrats, mostly from coal-producing states or the South, joined Republicans in support of it. Three Republicans opposed the bill.

A similar measure is pending in the Senate but faces a more difficult path.

"The Obama administration clearly wants to use its regulatory agenda to end coal-fired power generation in this country, but that is a pipe dream," said Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, noting that coal provides nearly 40 percent of the nation's electricity.

Rep. Ed Whitfield, R-Ky., called the EPA proposal "one of the most extreme regulations of the Obama administration. He said the proposed limits on carbon emissions would "make it impossible to build a new coal-fired power plant in America."

As a practical matter, no new coal plants are currently being considered because of competition from cheap natural gas. But Whitfield and other Republicans argue that could change if natural gas prices keep rising. In that case, utility companies should be able to "go out and build a coal-powered plant with reasonable regulations," said Whitfield, who chairs the House subcommittee on energy and power.

The Whitfield-sponsored House bill requires EPA to set carbon emissions standards based on technology that has been in use for at least a year. Republicans and some coal-state Democrats say the EPA rule is based on carbon-capturing technology that doesn't currently exist.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., denounced the legislation as "a science-denial bill" that would strip the EPA of its ability to block carbon pollution. He and other Democrats called the bill a blatant attempt to thwart the EPA and vilify the Obama administration in an election year.

The White House has threatened to veto, saying the bill would "undermine public

health protections of the Clean Air Act and stop U.S. progress in cutting dangerous carbon pollution from power plants." Power plants account for about one-third of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming.

EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy and other officials have said the proposed rule — the first of two major regulations aimed at limiting carbon pollution from power plants — is based on carbon reduction methods that are "technically feasible" and under development in at least four sites. The rule affecting future plants is a prelude to a more ambitious plan, expected later this year, to curb carbon pollution from existing powerplants.

"We looked at the data available. We looked at the technologies," McCarthy told the Senate Environment Committee in January. "We made a determination that (carbon capture and storage technology) was the best system for emission reductions for coal facilities moving forward, because it was technically feasible and it would lead to significant emission reductions."

Whitfield and other critics dispute that, saying carbon capture technology is years away from being commercially viable.

A Senate bill sponsored by Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., would require the EPA to set standards on based on commercially available technology.

Manchin's approach has drawn support from other Democrats who represent energy-producing states, including Sens. Joe Donnelly of Indiana, Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota and Mary Landrieu of Louisiana. Landrieu faces a tough re-election fight in a state where both Obama and the EPA are unpopular.

A spokesman for Manchin said Thursday that the senator plans to meet with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and other Democrats to discuss a path forward, but did not offer a timetable.

A spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., expressed doubts that Manchin's bill will get a vote in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

"If the president doesn't want (the bill), Harry Reid is going to block it, even if it is good for jobs and even it's good for Kentucky," said McConnell spokesman Don Stewart.

Republicans have accused the EPA of dragging its feet on the power plant rule so it won't become final until after the 2014 midterm elections.

EPA Administrator McCarthy announced the proposal in September, but the measure was not printed in the Federal Register until January. The delay means the rule is unlikely to be completed until next year. A public comment period on the rule was supposed to expire next week, but has been extended until May 9.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/01/2014 - 9:41am*):
http://www.chem.info/news/2014/03/house-blocks-obamas-carbon-curbs