

Renewable Energy: Bipartisan Haven in an Acrimonious Congress:

The bitter partisan debate about deficit reduction and the debt ceiling creates the impression that members of Congress are incapable of working together. In fact, members of Congress are finding productive ways to collaborate. Renewable energy is one area in which bipartisan bills are fairly common.

The eleven bipartisan bills described below are all modest concrete steps on the road to a low-carbon future. None are perfect, nor are they grand schemes to save the planet. FCNL still supports all of them and applauds the senators and representatives who have chosen to work across party lines.

Regional interests, not party, have always dominated the politics of energy and the environment. That principle holds true for most of these bills. The geothermal bills are sponsored by senators from western and mountain states. The 45 representatives who are co-sponsoring H.R. 1516, which would make renewable fuel pipelines eligible for federal loan guarantees, come from the Northeast and northern Midwest, states where people heat with oil and wood.

The listed bills also illustrate the impact individual members of congress can have. Senator Jeff Bingaman, a Democrat from New Mexico, is Chair of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. Senator Lisa Murkowski, a Republican from Alaska, is the Ranking Minority Member. Most of the bills come from their committee. Senator Bingaman is known for being pragmatic and wanting to make deals come together. This is his last term in Congress, and he wants to leave a legacy of energy bills. Senator Murkowski just won a very tough election against a tea party candidate. Her victory seems to have given her a renewed independence.

It is hard to know whether any of these bills will be enacted, but they have a chance because they are bipartisan. Write your senators and representative and urge them to support these bills by co-sponsoring or voting for them.

Bipartisan Legislation

Biofuels

H.R. 1516 "Renewable Fuel Pipeline Act of 2011," which was introduced by Representatives Leonard Boswell (IA) and Lee Terry (RE), would make renewable fuel pipelines eligible for federal loan guarantees under the Energy Policy Act of 2005.

H.R. 1756 "National Oilheat Research Alliance Reauthorization Act of 2011" is sponsored Representative Charles Bass (NH) and 45 other Republican and Democratic representatives. It reauthorizes the National Oilheat Alliance and requires it to shift its research focus to biofuels and energy efficiency..

Tidal and Hydropower

S. 629 "Hydropower Improvement Act of 2011" is sponsored by Senators Lisa Murkowski (AK), Mark Begich (AK), Jeff Bingaman (NM), Maria Cantwell (WA), Jim Risch (ID), Patty Murray (WA), Sheldon Whitehouse (RI), and Ron Wyden (OR). It is designed to improve the efficiency of hydro-power generation and make better use of existing dams that do not generate power at present.

S. 630 "Marine and Hydrokinetic Renewable Energy Promotion Act of 2011," sponsored by Senators Murkowski (AK) and Begich (AK), provides research grants for tidal energy projects.

H.R. 795 "Small-Scale Hydropower Enhancement Act of 2011" is sponsored by Representative Adrian Smith (NE), Jim Costa (CA) and eleven other Democrats and Republicans in the House. It exempts small hydropower projects of less than 1.5 megawatts from the need to get a license.

Energy Efficiency

S. 398, "Implementation of National Consensus Appliance Agreements Act of 2011" is sponsored by Senator Bingaman and 30 other Senators. Although most of the co-sponsors are Democrats some influential Republicans are supporting it too. This bill, like S. 1000, provides for stricter appliance efficiency standards.

S. 948, "Promoting Electric Vehicles Act of 2011" was introduced by Senators Jeff Merkley (OR) and Lamar Alexander (TN). The bill supports the deployment of electric vehicle plug-in stations by requiring planning, the development of model building codes and demonstration grants for communities. It requires federal agencies to request funding for electric cars and plug in stations in their budgets. It creates a "Batteries of the Future Prize" and provides funds for plug-in vehicle research.

[S. 1000](#), "Energy Savings and Industrial Competitiveness Act of 2011" is sponsored by Senators Jeanne Shaheen (NH) and Rob Portman (OH). This is a big bill, 194 pages long. It requires a new model building energy code with a goal of no net energy use for new buildings by 2030, stricter energy efficiency standards for appliances, loans for energy efficiency projects in rural areas, upgrading existing facilities and industrial facilities and grants for research on industrial efficiency. A Supply Star program is added to the Energy Star program and rebates are provided for people who buy efficient electric motors. Finally, the federal government is required to become more energy efficient.

Solar Bills

S. 1108 "10 Million Solar Roofs Act of 2011" sponsored by Senators Bernie Sanders (VT), John Boozman (NM) and Jeff Bingaman (NM) would give grants to towns and cities to streamline their processes for permitting solar panels on the roofs of homes and businesses. Individual towns or groups of towns are eligible to apply for these competitive grants.

Geothermal Bills

S. 1142 "Geothermal Exploration and Technology Act of 2011" Sponsored by Senators Jon Tester (MT), Lisa Murkowski (AK) and Harry Reid (NV), this bill creates a revolving fund to provide loans for geothermal exploratory wells. Information from such wells must be given to the Department of the Interior. If the wells do not find commercially useful geothermal resources, the loans can be forgiven. Otherwise loans are due in four years or when the well begins commercial operation, whichever happens first.

S. 1149 "The Geothermal Production Expansion Act of 2011." Sponsored by Senators Ron Wyden, (OR), Michael Crapo (ID), Jim Risch (ID) and Jeff Merkely (OR). This bill gives federal land managers the authority to lease federal land to private geothermal developers, without requiring a lease auction to be held. The federal government is required to charge the fair market value for the leases and can only lease to genuine developers, not people buying up geothermal rights for speculation or investment. The bill will also requires the federal government to study small hydropower facilities.