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Senate Energy Committee OKs energy bill in bipartisan 15-8 vote

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It took little more than an hour Wednesday for the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee to wrap up loose ends for its comprehensive energy bill, the American Clean Energy Leadership Act of 2009, and report it out to the full Senate. But the only certainty about the bill is that the contentious issues which divided the committee along regional lines will be debated once again on the Senate floor. It isn't even certain yet whether the Senate will consider the energy bill separately or combine it with climate legislation that the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee plans to begin work on soon.

Expressing his relief at reporting the bill out with a bipartisan 15-8 vote after 20 hearings and a dozen markup sessions, Committee Chair Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) commented that "Getting America running on clean energy has been a key goal of this mark-up. This bill will help shift our country to cleaner sources of energy, and more secure sources as well. The bipartisan, substantive and forward-looking approaches to energy found in this bill will move America toward the clean jobs and economic growth we need." But he also acknowledged that he and other Democrats failed to get all they wanted in the bill. He specifically noted that he favored including a more aggressive Renewable Electricity Standard. "I had earlier urged the committee to adopt a stronger Renewable Electricity Standard. I still think that is a good policy to do that," he said, adding "I'm sure that'll be a significant debate" when the bill moves to the full Senate.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), the Committee's Ranking Member, voted for the bill and welcomed it as a bipartisan bill and a step forward. But she commented that some of what Bingaman listed as the bill's achievements are on her list of problems. She promised that when the bill reaches the Senate floor, she will resume her fight to add more support for nuclear power, for more domestic oil and natural gas production, for opening up the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve to oil production, and for giving coastal states a share of oil and gas revenue from offshore production.

In the committee made up of 13 Democrats and 10 Republicans, Republicans Sam Brownback (R-KS), Jeff Sessions (R-AL) and Bob Corker (R-TN) joined Murkowski in supporting the bill. Corker explained that he did so based on his hope that the bill can be substantially improved when it reaches the full Senate. Meanwhile, two Democrats voted against the bill. Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-LA) voted no because she would like the bill to do more for domestic oil and gas production and for sharing offshore revenue with coastal states. In contrast, Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ) said he was voting against the

bill because while the bill includes “lots of good,” it also would “open more environmentally sensitive areas” to oil production and make other changes which support traditional energy rather than new renewable energy sources. Bernie Sanders (Ind-VT) said he was very reluctantly voting for “an extremely weak bill” with “totally inadequate” renewable energy provisions. He said he hopes the bill will be significantly strengthened by the full Senate where traditional energy interests may not have as much influence as they have with the Senate Energy Committee.

Murkowski concluded that “Despite an uphill fight against Democrats’ three-vote majority, we were able to include a number of provisions that will lead to more domestic production of the conventional energy we need to drive this country.” But she added that “While I support this bill in its present form, we simply must do more to increase our domestic production and use of nuclear energy. I will continue to press for those provisions on the Senate floor.” She also explained that “Renewables are an important part of our energy mix, but the reality is that we will remain dependent on fossil fuels for decades to come. We should not be importing oil and gas that we can produce here at home. Taking responsibility for our own energy needs will create good jobs and improve our energy security.”

For the Energy Committee’s detailed summary of the bill as reported out June 17th, go to: <http://energy.senate.gov>

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