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New climate bills floated as Senate Republicans continue boycott

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Confusion, rumor and determination somehow to proceed: those were some of the cross-currents Wednesday as the Senate climate bill debate continued.

On the stalling side, the seven Republican members of the Senate Environment & Public Works Committee continued their boycott, preventing the planned markup of the Kerry-Boxer climate bill for a second day. Meanwhile one group of farm-state senators introduced their own 65-page "Clean Energy Partnerships Act of 2009" designed to add more specific ag-related provisions to the Kerry-Boxer bill. And on what they called a "dual track," Sens. John Kerry (D-MA), Lindsay Graham (R-SC) and Joe Lieberman (I-CT) announced they're working with the White House on their own version of the Kerry-Boxer bill. Their revised bill based on the *New York Times* Op-Ed co-authored by Kerry and Graham would call for a greater role for nuclear and coal in order to build broader bipartisan support for climate legislation.

Perhaps the clearest sign of what is most likely to emerge from all the confusion came in a statement Wednesday by Senator Graham: "The green economy is coming. We can either follow or lead." He has stepped forward boldly – despite becoming the target of conservative attack ads – to say that he is committed to having the U.S. take a lead role in combating climate change.

Another person stepping forward Wednesday in support of moving ahead quickly with climate change legislation was Keith Bolin, President of the American Corn Growers Association (ACGA). At a time when other farm organizations are negotiating for better terms for ag in a climate bill, Bolin warns that "Agriculture must not continue to keep their heads in the sand regarding climate change. Farmers and ranchers will pay a huge price if we fail to take action. Other nations around the globe are acting now, including China, and the U.S. must help lead the way."

According to Bolin, "If agriculture continues to ignore sound science regarding the effects of increased greenhouse gasses, and our climate becomes increasingly erratic, to the point of even worsening production problems around the globe, the United States will be seen as obstructionists to a global effort that had great potential to help sustain the environment that family farmers depend on. Failure to act swiftly on this issue will result in a tragedy that our children's children will have to endure. The question then will be; why did we not act?"

The American Soybean Association took a more cautious approach Wednesday, stating that ASA can't support either the House-passed Waxman-Markey climate bill or the similar Kerry-Boxer bill. ASA President Johnny Dodson explained that "ASA is concerned with the impacts that could result from enactment of climate change legislation that unilaterally subjects U.S. farmers, manufacturers and other businesses to emissions caps and increased energy costs without appropriate measures to ensure that the U.S. maintains economic competitiveness."

But Dodson also warns that "inaction on energy and environmental issues may also have consequences and that absent legislation, potential regulatory action by the Environmental Protection Agency may be a more onerous and costly method of addressing the issues." ASA's answer to this dilemma is a three page list of "priorities for climate change legislation" to make the bill more acceptable to agriculture by provisions such as "making implementation of any U.S. climate change legislation contingent upon meaningful participation by major emitting countries, including major developing countries and our foreign competitors." To read ASA's full priorities list, go to: <http://www.soygrowers.com/policy/ClimateChange1109.pdf>.

Much of what ASA asks for is either already included in the Kerry-Boxer and Waxman-Markey bills, or would be added by the "Clean Energy Partnerships Act of 2009" introduced Wednesday by Sens. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), Max Baucus (D-MT), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Mark Begich (D-AK), and Tom Harkin (D-IA). Their bill is designed "To reduce greenhouse gas emissions from uncapped domestic sources," those sources being crops, livestock and forests. To read the Stabenow bill, go to: <http://www.agri-pulse.com/uploaded/20091104H.pdf>

Harkin explained Wednesday that the bill "includes four strong, carefully crafted provisions that give farmers and ranchers the opportunity to benefit from offsets and early actions under a program run by the USDA. It also includes low-carbon energy provisions that will be essential for continuing reductions of greenhouse gas emissions from our energy systems in the years ahead, as well as research into additional ways to sequester carbon in agriculture and on agricultural adaptation to maintain productivity as weather patterns change."

National Farmers Union President Roger Johnson reacted to the Stabenow bill by calling it "a significant and positive step forward." He added that "NFU strongly believes a legislative solution, rather than EPA regulation, is the best means to address climate change."

Now that even the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is calling for bipartisan climate change legislation, six years of failed attempts to pass a cap-and-trade climate bill through the Senate may result in a compromise bill reaching the Senate floor before the end of the year – and possible enactment into law next year. That timetable wouldn't give the U.S. a leadership position at the United Nations climate talks beginning Dec. 7th in Copenhagen and it would disappoint ACGA's Keith Bolin who hopes for "legislation sent to President Obama for enactment before the end of the year." Nonetheless, it would put the U.S. in a better position to catch up with countries like Germany, Japan, China and India which are moving ahead aggressively both to cap their greenhouse gas emissions and to develop new green technologies for export and profit.