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Senate Environment Committee passes climate bill in 11-1 vote

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With all seven Republican members continuing their three-day boycott of markup of the Kerry-Boxer climate change bill, on Thursday Senate Environment & Public Works Committee Chair Barbara Boxer (D-CA) used a procedural loophole to win a Democrats-only 11-1 vote for the bill. Of the committee's 12 Democrats, the only no-vote came from Sen. Max Baucus (D-MT) who favored the House-passed proposal for a 17% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 2005 levels by 2020, rather than the draft Senate bill's tougher 20% cut. He calls for using a trigger to raise the level to 20% if other countries agree to similar action.

The drawback to using the loophole was that, with no Republicans present, under Senate rules the committee was unable to consider any amendments to the bill. Committee Democrats planned to introduce various amendments to strengthen the bill. In particular, Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) would have added specifics dealing with agricultural and forestry offsets, reflecting the legislation introduced Wednesday by Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) along with Klobuchar and four other Senate Democrats. (For information on Sen. Stabenow's bill and a link to her bill, see: <http://www.agri-pulse.com/uploaded/20091104H1.pdf>).



Left, Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA), Right, Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) at the Kerry-Boxer climate bill markup in the Senate Environment Committee. Photos: Agri-Pulse.

The Republican boycott called for by the committee's Ranking Member James Inhofe (R-OK) was carried out in an attempt to delay committee consideration of the Kerry-Boxer bill until the EPA conducts a full economic analysis of the bill. In response to that request, Boxer presented the committee with 20,000 pages of printed analysis and another 320,000 page in electronic form. An EPA official called the EPA's extensive analysis of the bill "unprecedented" and committee Democrats labeled the GOP request an unacceptable delaying tactic. Democrats pointed out that with scores of amendments being considered, it would be premature to conduct a full five-week modeling analysis until a final bill can be drafted by merging the versions produced by all six Senate committees working on the legislation.

One Senate staffer quipped that perhaps the Republicans were simply not showing up for the markup sessions because "they're all too busy reading EPA's 340,000 pages of analysis."

With the hurdle of the Senate Environment Committee's passage of the Kerry-Boxer climate bill out of the way, the Senate climate bill debate returns to precisely where it was before – waiting for the Senate Agriculture Committee and the three other committees with jurisdiction over the legislation to either waive jurisdiction or forward their own bills to the full Senate. Then it will be up to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) to merge all separate climate bills with the two bills already passed by Boxer's Environment Committee and Sen. Jeff Bingaman's Senate Energy Committee.

#30