

White House's Carol Browner: administration remains committed to 'put a price on carbon'

By Jon H. Harsch

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Washington, Feb. 3 – White House Energy & Climate Change Advisor Carol Browner told the packed RETECH 2010 conference Wednesday that “We are as committed as ever in this administration to secure important energy legislation, legislation that will put a price on carbon, that will give us the certainty and predictability so that we can unleash American innovation and ingenuity.”

Browner said that when she headed the EPA during the Clinton administration, American industry defied the skeptics by creating environmental solutions quickly and cheaply. She said she's confident American industry can do the same again in response to climate change. But she said success depends on “a national renewable standard and a cap on dangerous pollutants that contribute to global warming. It means comprehensive energy and climate legislation that will not only allow us to lead the world in clean energy technology and manufacturing, but also in terms of national security.”

Browner said the best way to take advantage of the jobs and economic opportunities offered by renewable energy “is to put in place the right price signals here at home, create the demand here at home, so that our companies make the investments here at home.”

The 2,500 paying participants at the RETECH renewable energy conference, representing both major energy companies and small start-ups, demonstrated Browner's point that “The question isn't whether clean energy is a smart business decision” – it's just a question of whether the solar panels, wind turbines, biodigesters and biorefineries will be built in “Tokyo or Toledo. . . South Korea or South Carolina.”



White House's Carol Browner speaking at the RETECH 2010 conference. Photo: Agri-Pulse.

Browner acknowledged the “legislative debate” which has stalled climate legislation in the Senate. But she said the good news is that an active bipartisan discussion is under way, with Sens. John Kerry (D-MA), Joe Lieberman (I-CT) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) working on a new climate bill designed to “put a price on carbon.” Apparently abandoning the Kerry-Boxer climate bill which the Senate Environment Committee passed despite a solid Republican boycott, Browner said “We always knew that passing energy legislation in the Senate was going to require bipartisan commitment and so we are extremely encouraged by that bipartisan leadership.”

Another RETECH speaker, Jason Grumet, president of the Bipartisan Policy Center, also expressed optimism that the Kerry-Lieberman-Graham effort may result in Congress passing an energy bill this year with strong climate provisions. But he said that this will depend on making significant progress within the next six weeks. He said another avenue could be the bipartisan bill being offered by Sens. Maria Cantwell (D-WA) and Susan Collins (R-ME). In either case, he said the parameters changed dramatically thanks to the Wall Street crash, leaving Congress wary of anything that could involve financial “manipulation.” That fear, he said, seems to rule out the “common sense” approach of cap-and-trade” legislation in favor of the Cantwell-Collins cap-and-dividend idea of returning emissions cap money directly to consumers rather than routing it through a tainted Wall Street. He said the political reality today is that the once favored “market-based approach to environmental problems” no longer seems acceptable on Capitol Hill.

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