

Senate should pass Clean Energy and Security act

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Centre Daily Times, July 18, page A6

The Senate is now considering a major climate change bill, the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES). ACES barely made it through the House passed and will face an even tougher battle in the Senate. ACES is imperfect, featuring many political favors. It is also incomplete, neglecting important aspects of our response to energy and climate issues. Nonetheless, ACES is an important step forward. Pennsylvanians should urge their Senators, Casey and Specter, to support and strengthen this imperfect but important legislation.

First and foremost, we must recognize what's at stake. Inaction brings more climate change, which means droughts, floods, disease, and other catastrophes worldwide. In worst-case scenarios that cannot be ruled out, climate change threatens the very existence of human civilization. Meanwhile, remaining fossil fuel reserves are largely concentrated in geopolitically-sensitive places like the Middle East and Russia. The world is thus beginning the long, difficult transition away from fossil fuels, a fact that no automobile industry bailout can change. To deny or ignore this highly irresponsible.

ACES aims to address these challenges. Its cap-and-trade system reduces climate change at low monetary costs. It also requires some shifts away from fossil fuel use in electricity production, building design, and household appliances. Finally, ACES makes large investments in various research and development projects aimed to facilitate all these efforts.

ACES is certainly not perfect. 85% of initial cap-and-trade permits are given away as political favors. Also, given the urgency of climate change, one can easily argue that ACES isn't strong enough. Indeed, Greenpeace and several Representatives opposed ACES because it doesn't do enough. But energy policy cannot ignore political reality. A theoretically ideal policy that isn't passed achieves nothing. Thus while we should encourage Congress to strengthen ACES, we should also not reject milder versions.

ACES is also incomplete. First, ACES is only a U.S. policy, while energy and climate change are global issues. Without global cooperation, no U.S. policy will do much. But ACES will help the U.S. engage the ongoing global climate policy negotiations. Passing ACES now actually makes global cooperation easier. Second, many of the relevant decisions are ultimately local in nature. We can help by driving less, eating less livestock products, and living in more efficient buildings, among other things. The hard part is not the resulting lifestyles but the habit-breaking transition towards them. ACES provides helpful carrots and sticks, but it's still up to us.

We thus must recognize that ACES is not the silver bullet solution to our energy and climate problems. Even if it passes, we still have much work to do both locally and internationally. But ACES plays an important role and deserves our support. In the Senate, Casey and Specter may be key swing votes. We should encourage them to pass a strong version of ACES.