

An energy bill without energy

Contributed by John Breaux and Beverly O'Neill
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America's energy crisis is the greatest domestic challenge our country is facing and, with demand continuously outpacing supply, the trend is worsening. We must take serious and sober steps to solve this problem.

Unfortunately, Congress might actually make this problem worse since the House and Senate have passed competing energy bills that ultimately fail to deliver a comprehensive solution to our nation's energy challenge.

Put simply, both bills ignore the supply side of the energy equation. The bills focus almost solely on efficiency and conservation, and these are no doubt important priorities. But without adequate supplies of energy, America's economic growth and way of life will suffer. The good news is that there is room for consensus on this issue.

Through our nonprofit coalition, known as The Energy Initiative, we have brought together a diverse collection of 24 groups, including energy producers and consumer organizations committed to educating the public about energy policies and securing our energy future. Our diverse membership also received input from officials at all levels of government and from labor officials.

Over the past calendar year, during our deliberations, we have observed three recurring principles that should be borne in mind by policymakers and the public when examining energy issues.

First, a massive public education program is essential to ensuring that the public is aware of our energy crisis, a crisis driven by exploding demand that requires more supply. The International Energy Agency projects that global energy demand will increase by more than 50 percent between now and 2030. The need for more energy is inescapable, and Congress and the American people must recognize this.

Second, we need to fully utilize, investigate and develop all existing and potential sources of energy while at the same time aggressively exercise conservation and efficiency in the use of all energy.

Third, we must resist the temptation to burden any single energy source with the cost of meeting America's future energy needs. Instead, costs should be fairly shared among the various private energy sectors as well as the public sector.

We are concerned that current legislation falls short in these critical areas. Rather than recognize the need to develop all forms of energy, Congress is proposing billions of new taxes on traditional sources like oil and natural gas, taxes that would only add further pressure on supplies at a time when we need them most.

Guided by this understanding and these principles, The Energy Initiative outlined more than 30 specific policy recommendations in areas such as conservation and efficiency, tax incentives, and funding R&D efforts. In many cases, the bills passed in Congress cover these issues. But in the critical areas of production and supply, they fall woefully short.

Accordingly, it is our belief that Congress should take the following three steps to move this debate even further away from partisan politics and toward a solution that will benefit all Americans:

- Streamline the federal permitting process for energy exploration, production and refinement and delivery infrastructure on federal lands.

- Conduct a study to measure the impact of offshore drilling on the world's oceans and coastal areas over the past 40 years, accounting for technological improvements.

- Approve a balanced offshore leasing program that promotes exploration and ensures that the producing states receive a share of the federal resources from the activity.

Taken together, these principles and recommendations can lead our nation toward energy security. Rather than being backed by a singular special interest, these ideas represent a broad coalition of many interests.

Regarding climate change, Energy Initiative members understand that it's a serious issue that must be included in any discussion of our energy future. While these bills do not specifically address climate change policies, we support a public, transparent and informed debate on the issue.

From the beginning, members of our Initiative - including the oil and natural gas companies - have acknowledged that America must lead the way in developing new sources of alternative and renewable energy. But it's equally important to develop traditional energy sources like coal, nuclear, oil and natural gas.

The fact is that while renewable and alternative fuels are important and will grow rapidly, they will not significantly replace oil and natural gas for decades. Until they do, we need access to oil and natural gas resources - both here at home and around the world - to create a lasting and reliable supply and to keep our economy going strong.

America can lead the world in improving energy efficiency and diversifying resources through new technology. We must, however, recognize that demand for energy will continue to grow, and so we must responsibly increase energy from all sources.

Unfortunately, the bills passed by Congress fail to strike this balance and provide Americans with the energy we need to meet the challenges of the future. Unless Congress includes provisions for increasing supply, this will remain an energy bill without energy.

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