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Senate Dems Opening to Nuclear as Path to GOP Support for Climate Bill

By **DARREN SAMUELSON** of [ClimateWire](#)

Key Senate Democrats signaled yesterday they are willing to negotiate with Republicans on nuclear power and expanded domestic oil and gas development if it helps in nailing down the 60 votes necessary for floor passage on a comprehensive global warming and energy bill.

"Every idea is on the table," said Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry (D-Mass.), the lead sponsor of Senate climate legislation. "We're going to work in a bona fide way with everybody to see how to bridge a gap here. We've got to get a 60-vote margin. That means you've got to legislate, which means you have to compromise."

Several moderate Senate Republicans, including John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, said they are in talks with Kerry and Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.) on the nuclear language, as well as other key issues.

"A guy like Senator Kerry is looking for coalitions," Graham said. "If you had a bill that would allow for responsible offshore drilling, a robust nuclear power title, I think you could get some Republican votes for a cap-and-trade system."

The 821-page climate bill from Kerry and Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) includes a preliminary section on nuclear power that provides greater incentives for worker training and research, as well as funding for a Nuclear Regulatory Commission program to study the feasibility and reliability of expanding commercial reactors use beyond their current 40-year operating licenses, and into the 60- and 80-year operating periods.

The Nuclear Energy Institute said last week the Kerry-Boxer provisions were "a start in the right direction" but wanted to work with senators to create a "meaningful nuclear energy title."

Kerry yesterday said he is open to tacking onto the nuclear provisions in the bill. "There's a nuclear title and it invites discussion on that," he said. "I'm willing to sit down with anybody and talk seriously about how we proceed in a serious way."

Graham said he has urged the Obama administration and Democratic leaders to set up working groups for senators not on the relevant committees to address the nuclear power issue and questions about domestic energy development.

Graham suggested Kerry look to the tentative agreement reached last year among roughly 20 Senate moderates -- Democrat and Republican -- that would open up large swaths of new federal acreage to oil and gas development in the eastern Gulf of Mexico and along the coasts of Virginia, North and South Carolina,

and Georgia.

"I'm not talking about anything that hasn't been vetted," Graham said. "This is an idea that has been vetted and got a lot of Democratic support."

Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) also cited the work of the same group of moderate senators on energy. "There's more common ground than there has been with health care," she said. "It just depends on what it is, but again, I think people are willing and open to talk about any energy that helps our country to put us back in the driver's seat again."

Kerry said he is trying to get buy in from the Obama administration on a variety of negotiation points on the climate bill, citing meetings Monday that included Obama, White House political adviser David Axelrod, White House science adviser John Holdren and Energy Secretary Steven Chu.

"The message [Obama] wanted to get over is he's committed to moving forward," Kerry said. "He views it as a critical. It's a job creator. A national security priority."

After talking with Holdren and Chu, Kerry said the administration is focused on the nuclear waste issues -- no doubt a sore spot given longstanding opposition from Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) to the Yucca Mountain permanent waste storage site.

"We're looking at the technology and the science very, very closely, and obviously attendant issues," Kerry said. "There are a number of different concerns about that. But we're looking at it. We're trying to figure it out."

What the Republicans want

Graham said he is pushing for language in the Senate bill that puts nuclear power on par with wind and solar power in terms of tax credits and inclusion in a nationwide renewable electricity standard.

"Also to deal with the waste stream," Graham added. "You've got to have a disposition plan to deal with the waste."

McCain said he brings four major demands to the negotiation table: a commitment to construction of new nuclear power plants, loan guarantees, and solutions for both nuclear waste storage and recycling.

"They're not new ideas," McCain said.

Most expect the nuclear proposal to come up during the floor debate on a climate bill, rather than during a markup in Boxer's Environment and Public Works Committee.

"I think there'll be some beginnings of it in the committee process, but I think the whole bill, given so many different committees are working on it, the bill will ultimately come together on the floor," said Klobuchar. "I think we'd be naive to think that that's not true."

In a sign of diminished political power from nuclear opponents, Boxer last week suggested an effort to expand nuclear incentives could win wide support, whether she backed it or not.

"I think it's fair to say the vast majority of senators are very pro-nuclear and so the way I vote on the amendment is not the deciding factor, because in this case you have a sea change of support beyond where I am," Boxer said.

Boxer in 2005 joined three other Senate Democrats in a floor vote against a McCain-Lieberman climate bill because of what she said were too many giveaways for the nuclear industry.

Several other Senate Democrats also say they are open to talks on nuclear power.

"One of the things we need to devote some resources to is beginning to figure out what to do with the spent nuclear fuel rods," said Sen. Tom Carper (D-Del.). "Do we recycle them? Do we reprocess them? I think there's problems with current technology on both of those. We need to figure out what to do with them. We can safely store the stuff on site. And we'll do for several decades."

At the same time, Carper may have teased out one sticking point when he said that he was not sure loan guarantees were a necessity given the boost that already exists from other key pieces of a cap-and-trade system.

"The legislation as drawn provides enormous incentives for the generation of electricity from sources that don't create carbon," he said. "Nuclear is right there. So there'll be a lot of incentives, just from the way the allowance system will be set up."

Carper said he is in talks with a "good number" of Republicans on the nuclear language, but he did not know if it would convince many to vote for the bill.

It is unclear exactly how many GOP votes could be in play by dealing with nuclear power. Republicans who routinely talk about the need to revitalize the industry include Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, George Voinovich of Ohio, Lamar Alexander of Tennessee and Johnny Isakson of Georgia.

Voinovich said he does not think an agreement on nuclear power would get Democratic sponsors to 60 votes. "This bill, if it's going to be successful, it's going to have to be harmonized as much as it can with an international effort," he said.

As for whether Republicans would agree to changes to the bill that could give President Obama a big victory, Graham said that is not an issue for him.

"I think the planet is heating up," Graham said. "I think CO2 emissions are damaging the environment and this dependence on foreign oil is a natural disaster in the making. Let's do something about it. I'd like to solve a problem, and if it's on President Obama's watch, it doesn't bother me one bit if it makes the country better off."

Senior reporter Ben Geman contributed.

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