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Where’s the Senate on This One?

As early as Thursday, Americans will learn whether their senators have been paying the slightest attention to the disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. The occasion will be a vote on a mischievous and potentially destructive resolution by Lisa Murkowski, an Alaska Republican. It seeks to overturn the Environmental Protection Agency’s formal determination in 2009 that the buildup of greenhouse gases threatens public health and welfare.

That finding is the basis of E.P.A.’s authority to regulate carbon dioxide from vehicles and other sources. It is also one of the main underpinnings of the historic agreement in April to tighten fuel economy standards for the first time in more than 30 years. Repudiating the finding would cripple the E.P.A.’s ability to enforce that agreement as well as its authority to require stronger standards in the future. This is precisely the wrong thing to do in a country that needs to reduce its dependency on oil.

Ms. Murkowski’s proposal is objectionable for many other reasons. It would repudiate years of work by America’s most reputable scientists and public health experts. It would prevent the E.P.A. from regulating greenhouse gases from sources like refineries and power plants in the future. And it would send a discouraging message to a federal agency that appears to take its regulatory duties seriously, unlike the Minerals Management Service, which failed to police the oil industry.

Ms. Murkowski says she worries about oil dependency and global warming and is shocked by the gulf oil spill. She also says she would prefer that Congress pass a broad energy bill rather than handing E.P.A. “top down” regulatory authority over the economy.

President Obama would prefer a legislative solution as well. So would the E.P.A. But neither
wants to unilaterally disarm the agency before Congress does something significant, on its own, about oil dependency and climate change. So far it has not.