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Kerry-Boxer Climate Proposal Leaves Question Mark for Forestry Groups

By Allison Winter of ClimateWire

Conservation and forestry groups that have been hoping to plant roots in the Senate climate bill are divided over whether the proposal introduced this week will advance opportunities for tree farmers and forest managers to profit from carbon sequestration.

The bill (pdf) that Sens. John Kerry (D-Mass.) and Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) unveiled this week provides significant opportunities for domestic offsets from carbon-storing conservation projects, but the extent to which forests and forest products would participate is not entirely clear.

Forest conservation advocates have been pressing the Senate to include robust incentives to help store carbon and stem the loss of domestic forests, and the groups applauded the senators for including forestry as one option in its expanded offsets program.

But at least one forestry industry group is questioning whether the language of the proposed bill would definitely open the door for their participation.

"I think you have to take legislation on its face and not presume too much, and if you take this on its face, it falls short," said David Tenny, president of the National Alliance of Forest Owners.

Like the cap-and-trade bill the House approved this past summer, the Kerry-Boxer

proposal allows regulated industries that cannot meet greenhouse gas reductions at the smokestack to buy offset credits by investing in green energy or greenhouse gas reduction projects. The provision could significantly reduce compliance costs for some industries.

The total number of allowed offsets, which would pay for things like mass tree plantings, is 2 billion tons yearly, the same as the House. But the Senate proposal shifts more of those offsets to domestic projects. It would allow international offsets to account for a quarter of projects annually rather than the half called for in the House bill.

All of this is good news to U.S. forestry groups and land trusts, which want a robust domestic offset program to help curb the more than 2.2 million acres of forest, farm and rangeland that the United States loses each year. The Agriculture Department has predicted the country could lose up to 75 million acres of forests in the next 50 years.

"I think we're seeing a good evolution with regard to how the Senate sees the role of land in addressing climate change, particularly the role they see for land in the United States," said Laurie Wayburn, president of the California-based Pacific Forest Trust. "And I think we're seeing a very good development in the recognition that we need to address emissions from domestic deforestation and land conservation and we can make significant credible gains from stewardship and forests."

The question is whether the language in the bill is specific enough to ensure forestry's participation.

The Kerry-Boxer bill tasks the administration with developing a list of projects that should be used for offsets. The legislation includes a list of projects that should be given "priority consideration" -- including reforestation, forest management projects and harvested wood products.

The priority list includes all the forestry practices that tree farmers have pushed for. The concern for Tenny's forestry industry group is that it does not mandate that forestry projects be on the offset list. Rather, the bill gives the administration ultimate discretion to choose the list of eligible projects, even if it asks them to make forestry and other practices a priority.

Other groups, like the Pacific Forest Trust and the Trust for Public Land, were less concerned and applauded Kerry and Boxer for their consideration of forestry, even if they would have preferred to see "shall" or "must" language.

"I can see why just having the words there would make some people feel encouraged ... but the language does not have a great deal of significance because of what happens thereafter, the whole process begins from a blank slate," Tenny said. "If you look at it at this point, they are just words."

Compromises

The compromise agreement that Rep. Collin Peterson (D-Minn.) brokered in the House was slightly more direct. It said the permissible offsets "shall" include practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions or sequester greenhouse gases, starting with a list included in the bill.

The concern for Tenny's group highlights the minefield the 821-page bill poses for lawmakers who want to please a variety of interests, each of which may have very

specific concerns about relatively small provisions in the bill that could alter their industry.

For instance, many forest and agriculture groups would also like the bill to tighten some deadlines for setting up the offsets program and see a bigger, more defined role for the Agriculture Department, which has a history of working with landowners on conservation projects.

The new Senate text gives the president jurisdiction over the potential program, rather than defining clear roles for USDA and U.S. EPA.

Farm and forestry groups are making their case to Senate Agriculture Chairwoman Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.) and other members of her panel as she considers a markup to weigh in on the agriculture and forestry portions of the bill. The agriculture and forestry language currently in the Kerry-Boxer bill could serve as a placeholder until lawmakers with a more vested interest in the industries have a chance to weigh in on the bill -- much as Peterson did in the House.

"The new Senate proposal is a significant step forward; there are some additional improvements that could be made ... but the Senate has a lot of smart people on these issues who can contribute a lot to advancing it forward," said Jad Daley, director of the climate conservation program for the Trust for Public Land. "It does feel like a great start.

In addition to Lincoln, groups are looking to Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.), who has been working on her own agriculture package that could be appended to the bill in committee or on the Senate floor, should the climate bill come up for a vote.

And Sens. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) and Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) have introduced their own placemaker bill -- widely supported by forestry and conservation groups -- that would expand on incentives for small forest landowners in the climate bill.