Former Senator Says Economic Turmoil May Break Climate Bill ‘Logjam’

Posted October 21, 2008

Former Sen. Timothy Wirth (D-CO)—a significant player in the creation of the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments and now head of the United Nations Foundation—is suggesting that the current economic crisis could help “break the logjam” on congressional efforts to tackle global warming, including a cap-and-trade program for greenhouse gases.

In an interview with Carbon Control News, Wirth said the next president would face both pressures and opportunities to address energy and climate change as part of a broad economic agenda, though he speculated that an Obama administration would likely move more aggressively and rapidly on the issue than a McCain presidency would. Wirth provided his perspective on the current economic situation and next year’s energy and climate change agenda in Congress, including the possible parallels he sees between the current climate change debate and the lead up to passage of the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments during Wirth’s Senate tenure.

Wirth said the cap-and-trade idea for acid rain helped to break the political logjam on Clean Air policy almost twenty years ago, but, “I think it is economics that are going to break the logjam” on climate policy in the present. Wirth said the next president can focus on moving to a low-carbon economy in tandem with needs for an aggressive stimulus package, the need to “get a price on carbon” to deal with climate change and the issue of energy security. “It will all be wrapped together,” Wirth suggested.

Wirth currently serves as president of the United Nations Foundation, which advocates for an international climate change agreement as part of the group’s energy and climate agenda. That agenda also includes efforts to double energy efficiency in key nations and working with the United Nations to deploy clean technology abroad, according to the group’s Web site. Wirth also served as Undersecretary for Global Affairs at the State Department from 1993 to 1997, and his Capitol Hill tenure coincided with a decade-long buildup to the passage of the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments. After serving as a House member from 1975-1987, Wirth moved to the Senate and coauthored “Project 88,” which laid out a set of initiatives for the incoming president and touted the idea of a cap-and-trade program for acid rain. Cap and trade became a centerpiece of amendments, and a Democratic Congress approved the amendments, in cooperation with a Republican president—George Herbert Walker Bush.

Legislative Building Blocks

In the interview, Wirth said regardless of who wins the presidential election, both Sens. John McCain (R-AZ) and Barack Obama (D-IL) would face similar pressures and opportunities to act on energy and climate change, and he noted that both candidates support cap-and-trade legislation. However, he expressed doubt that McCain would move as “aggressively or rapidly” as an Obama White House, and said he would “not be surprised” if the Obama team moved particularly fast, perhaps with an initial
statement of support for cap-and-trade and a push for immediate action on several separate “building blocks” for a climate change policy. Wirth cited as possible building blocks a major commitment to infrastructure including a “smart” electricity grid; an effort to boost end-use energy efficiency that includes efforts to encourage states to reward energy efficiency rather than energy production; a research and development initiative focused on issues including carbon capture and sequestration as well as “next generation biofuels”; and new initiatives to boost innovation from Detroit automakers, such as incentives for consumers to purchase advanced vehicles.

Wirth said Congress could take action on the building blocks “within the first three months” of a new administration. Action on cap-and-trade, Wirth said, would take longer, but the new president could still use multiple opportunities to tee up the issue of climate change, including cap-and-trade, almost immediately, including venues such as a policy speech or even a letter to the United Nations. Wirth says the incoming president elect of either party may want to seize the opportunity of issuing climate-related statements prior to or in tandem with upcoming December climate talks in Poznan, Poland. “Otherwise the Bush position will be the U.S. position,” Wirth suggests. The State of the Union also offers an opportunity to add additional detail, Wirth said.

Many of the policies Wirth cited echo recommendations from the think tank Center for American Progress, whose president, John Podesta, is heading up the transition effort for the Obama camp and who served as President Bill Clinton’s chief of staff. Regarding Podesta, Wirth said if Obama wins the election, “they ought to make Podesta the energy czar” much as the Clinton administration made Robert Rubin an economic czar during the early 1990s. Rubin headed the National Economic Council, created by President Clinton to advise the president on U.S. and global economic policy, before serving as Treasury secretary during the Clinton administration.

Clean Air Act Parallels

Asked about parallels between the 1990 fight over the Clean Air Act and today’s climate debate, Wirth said there are both similarities and differences, including similar arguments about science and economic impacts.

“Right up to the end, we had continuing resistance . . . debates over the science . . . major attacks on the economics of it . . . It was going to break the country and our economy, and increase lower back pain. And then the [political] dam broke.”

Wirth acknowledged that climate change, however, may be tough going for Congress and the administration. “The size of this problem is bigger than it was [with the 1990 air act] but you have a similar kind of dynamic.”

Wirth said challenges include unifying Hill Democrats on the issue as well as reaching a “difficult political deal” on how many emissions allowances to auction. “I think it is easier in the House,” than in the Senate, Wirth said, in apparent reference to the ever present threat of a Senate filibuster.

Wirth noted that lawmakers such as House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman John Dingell (D-MI) and Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) have repeatedly clashed on environmental issues, but notes that they historically come together to strike deals when the time comes.

On the design of a cap-and-trade bill, Wirth says he personally would favor auctioning all emissions allowances but expressed some misgivings about such an effort being used simply as a “revenue raiser.”

And in response to a question regarding critics who say an economic crisis is no time to enact a potentially expensive climate policy, Wirth argued that “we cannot afford not to,” given the problems of the economy, security, and climate change. “The economic crisis is the opportunity that now makes
this possible.”—Doug Obey

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