

Obama team: US needs bill to lead in clean energy

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Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass. gestures while testifying on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, Oct. 27, 2009, before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee hearing on clean energy jobs. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

(AP) -- The Obama administration warned on Tuesday that the U.S. could slip further behind China and other countries in clean energy development if Congress fails to pass climate legislation, as early signs of a rift emerged among Democrats over the bill's costs.

Energy Secretary Steven Chu told a Senate panel that the U.S. has stumbled in the clean [energy](#) race and to catch up Congress must enact comprehensive energy legislation that puts the first-ever limits on the gases blamed for global warming.

"The United States ... has fallen behind," said Chu. "But I remain confident that we can make up the ground."

While the legislation is likely to clear the environment panel, more than a dozen Democrats have voice serious concerns about the potential economic fallout from shifting away from fossil fuels to reduce carbon dioxide and other [greenhouse gas emissions](#).

On Tuesday, Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., chairman of the Finance Committee, told the hearing Tuesday that he had "serious reservations" with the aggressive effort to cut emissions over the next decade. The bill calls for greenhouse gases to be cut by 20 percent by 2020, a target that was scaled back to 17 percent in the House after opposition from coal-state Democrats.

"We cannot afford a first step that takes us further away from an achievable consensus on commonsense climate change legislation," Baucus said.

"Montana can't afford the unmitigated impacts of climate change, but we also cannot afford the unmitigated effects of climate change legislation," he said.

The chief author of the Senate bill, Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., acknowledged that the bill would raise energy prices, but said the savings from reducing energy and the money to be made in new technologies were far greater.

"Are there some costs? Yes, sir, there are some costs," Kerry said. He added that while an array of studies show restricting greenhouse gases will lead to higher energy prices, "none of them factor in the cost of doing nothing."

Kerry got some much-needed backup from President Barack Obama, who made a stop at a solar energy site in Florida Tuesday.

The president warned that opponents, whom he did not identify, would work against the climate bill.

"They're going to argue that we should do nothing, stand pat, do less or delay action yet again," said Obama. "It's a debate between looking backward and looking forward, between those who are ready to seize the future and those who are afraid of the future."

An Environmental Protection Agency analysis released late Friday said the average household would pay an additional \$80 to \$111 a year to power their homes and fuel their cars if the bill becomes law and businesses pass on the cost of reducing pollution to consumers.

Republicans questioned the validity of the EPA study Tuesday. And Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, the panel's top Republican, and a skeptic of the science behind global warming, said Americans would not stomach the expense.

"This is something the American people can't tolerate and I don't think they will," Inhofe said.

With weeks remaining before 192 nations gather in Copenhagen, Denmark to negotiate a new global treaty to slow [climate change](#), time is running out for the Senate to bridge the differences and pass a climate bill this year.

Republicans complained that chairman Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., who hopes to have the bill out of the environment committee in early November, was trying to rush the bill through without adequate study into its cost.

"Why are we trying to jam down this legislation now?" asked Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio. "Wouldn't it be smarter to take our time and do it right?"

The bill is S. 1733.

On the Net:

Senate Environmental and Public Works Committee:

<http://www.epw.senate.gov>

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