

Environmental issues top major legislative meeting in China (Update)

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China's Minister of Environmental Protection Chen Jining answers a reporter's question during a press conference in Beijing, Saturday, March 7, 2015. China's severe environmental problems and government pledges to fix them have dominated the start of the country's closely watched annual legislative meeting this week, as leaders try to ease public worries about air, water and soil contamination that threatens to derail China's economic rise. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

China's severe environmental problems and government pledges to fix

them have dominated the start of the country's annual legislative meeting, as leaders try to ease public worries about air, water and soil contamination that threaten to derail the country's economic rise and cast doubts on the ruling Communist Party.

Two days into the session of the National People's Congress in a Beijing shrouded with smog, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged Friday to "punish, with an iron hand, any violators who destroy the ecology or environment, with no exceptions," according to China's official Xinhua News Agency. At the meeting's opening event on Thursday, Premier Li Keqiang swore the government would cut back on major pollutants and improve energy efficiency.

At a news conference Saturday, the newly appointed environment minister, Chen Jining, promised the strictest enforcement of China's environmental laws.

The environmental focus, which included a flurry of other announcements about crackdowns on coal use and carbon emissions, reflects worries that mounting public anger over hazardous pollution could threaten the government's rule.

The government is trying to control the debate and, in a sign of the issue's sensitivity, began blocking online access Friday to a phenomenally popular documentary, "Under the Dome," that was released a week ago and lays out the health and societal costs of the country's environmental crisis.

"They've made a big deal about air pollution in the last couple of (legislative meetings)," said Alvin Lin, the Beijing-based China climate and energy policy director of the U.S. environmental group the Natural Resources Defense Council. "'Under the Dome' made it so they really, really have to talk about it."

Chinese officials at the meeting said they would cut coal consumption by 160 million tons over the next five years, while the vice mayor of Beijing said the capital would shut down 300 factories and take 200,000 heavily polluting vehicles off the roads this year. In November, Xi pledged to stop the growth in Chinese carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 and, by that same year, double the share of its energy matrix generated by non-fossil fuels.

Still, measurements of the particulate matter PM2.5 in Beijing's air Saturday were seven times the level considered safe by the World Health Organization. And China continues to emit more greenhouse gases than any other country—twice that of the United States, the world's second-biggest emitter of carbon dioxide.



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"They are really serious about this, except the problem is really entrenched," said Willy Lam, a political analyst at Chinese University in Hong Kong. "It is intertwined with all aspects of industry and agriculture and so forth, and it's a really difficult problem to tackle."

The depth of public passion about China's ailing environment became clear this past week with the release of the 104-minute documentary by Chai Jing, a former state television network reporter. More than 175 million people viewed the film online in just a few days.

Chen, a former university president recently appointed China's environment minister, at first praised the film, saying it reflected "growing public concern over environmental protection and threats to human health."

Yet the buzz around the documentary ultimately made officials nervous, prompting them to play defense at the National People's Congress meeting and take down the film, Lam said. Chinese authorities pointedly managed to avoid having Chen answer any questions about the documentary Saturday.

"Although this is a perennial issue, there's heightened concern because this affects everybody, even (legislative) members who come from a privileged background," Lam said.

Instead, Chen explained why China has been wary of environmental

activism, such as spontaneous protests of industrial projects that have sprung up in Chinese cities over the past several years.

"Other appeals can be mixed into this process," Chen said. "If you don't handle it well, it will cause mass incidents that hurt the government's credibility, turning an environmental issue into a social or political issue. So we indeed need to handle them with great caution."

On the other hand, Chen said the country's environmental laws, which went into effect in January, should not just be "a piece of paper" and that the ministry would launch a thorough check of environmental violations.

"We will completely change the past situation where environmental law enforcement has been too lax and too soft," Chen said. "Abiding by the law should be the norm."

He said China also would shield its less developed western regions by resisting the temptation to move industries from the country's more populated and increasingly more regulated east.

Whether that concern lasts beyond the legislative meetings depends on whether Chinese officials and citizens truly make use of new tools such as a revised environmental law that went into effect in January, said the Natural Resources Defense Council's Lin.

"I don't think it's lip service," Lin said. "I think they'll continue to push on this."

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