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Obama Urged to Act Alone on Climate If Congress Unwilling to Pass Legislation

By Dean Scott - Jan 28, 2014

[Bloomberg BNA](#) — As President Barack Obama prepares to give his Jan. 28 State of the Union address, advocates of greenhouse gas reductions are urging the president to turn up pressure on Congress to pass climate legislation while demonstrating his willingness to act alone in the face of congressional inaction.

The president in last year's address called on Congress to move forward on a market-based approach to reduce emissions but warned that if it was unwilling to act, he would use his executive branch authority to cut greenhouse gases and prepare local communities for more severe storms related to climate change.

During the past year, Obama moved forward on much of that pledge, establishing timetables for the Environmental Protection Agency to begin setting carbon dioxide limits for new and existing power plants, part of a broad climate action plan he unveiled in June 2013. But environmental groups want the president, who made greenhouse gas cap-and-trade legislation the cornerstone of his climate and clean energy efforts in his first term only to see it die in the Senate, to signal that climate action remains a top priority.

The president should “reaffirm his commitment to the aggressive timetable and agenda he laid out a year ago, especially with regard to regulating greenhouse gas emissions from existing power plants,” according to Ned Helme, president of the Center for Clean Air Policy. EPA is initially slated to set power plant carbon limits for new plants, but those will trigger separate regulatory guidelines for existing plants—which Obama wants finalized by June 2015. It is the requirements for existing plants that will have a significant impact on emissions because there are virtually no coal-fired power plants in the pipeline.

Dan Weiss, a senior fellow on energy and environment for the Center for American Progress, said he expects Obama to use his address to Congress to point to his administration's progress in setting greenhouse gas limits for cars and light trucks, the ongoing boom in natural gas that has helped curtail U.S. emissions and improved energy efficiency.

“Then I expect he would talk briefly about implementing his climate action plan” Weiss told Bloomberg BNA, adding that Obama may remind Congress that he launched the array of executive branch actions only after Congress failed to heed his call for action in his February 2013 State of the Union address.

While the EPA power plant rules are widely seen as the most significant efforts, the June 2013 climate plan also included policies to shift U.S. financing away from overseas coal-fired power plants to clean energy projects and improved coordination between local, state, and federal authorities to prepare and adapt to climate impacts including rising sea level.

“I think there will be about the same level” of focus on climate change in the upcoming address as in last year's, Weiss said, including calls on Congress to renew tax breaks and other incentives for solar, wind, and other renewable energy technologies. “If he gets into any detail at all, I'd expect him to say we are developing a plan to reduce carbon pollution for power plants, that it will be flexible, and that states ultimately will devise” the plans implementing the emissions cuts for existing plants, Weiss said.

Under Obama's timetable, states would submit their plans no later than June 30, 2016.

Other Items

The Center for American Progress, in a Jan. 24 analysis, called on the president to add five more items to build on his climate action plan, including an ambitious U.S. pledge to cut its greenhouse gas emissions as it negotiates a global climate accord to be signed in Paris in December 2015. The center's “5 More Items for President Obama's Climate Change To-Do List” also urges Obama to push for extending wind, solar, and other renewable energy tax incentives through 2020; pursue protections the Arctic Ocean from oil production; oppose efforts to export U.S. oil; and establish a “carbon pollution reduction plan” to ensure that oil and gas production from U.S. public lands does not outstrip the ability of public forests and other land to store carbon.

White House officials traditionally provide few details beyond broad brush strokes in advance of the president's annual address to Congress, and this year is no exception. But with Congress still deadlocked over extending emergency unemployment benefits and the president's recent focus on rising economic inequality and the need to strengthen the middle class, the president is likely to link any mention of clean energy and climate action to the jobs those policies could produce.

“As always, he'll be working on it right up until game time, but three words sum up the President's message on Tuesday night: opportunity, action, and optimism,” White House Senior Adviser Dan Pfeiffer wrote in a Jan. 25 email to supporters, adding that the speech will include “real, concrete, practical proposals to grow the economy [and] strengthen the middle class.”

But just as Obama warned in last year's speech that he would act on climate change if Congress did not, the president will warn that he “will not wait for Congress” on economic issues including job creation, Pfeiffer wrote. President Obama will also embrace the bully pulpit provided by the White House, he wrote, adding that the president “has a pen and he has a phone, and he will use them to take executive action” to enlist those outside of Congress, including business owners, mayors and state legislators, to work on job creation and to improve the economy.

Many environmental advocates say that while the president has shown more recently that he will use that pulpit to talk about climate change—including a 45-minute speech at Georgetown University on June 25 where he first outlined his climate plan—he should make greater use of it beginning with his Jan. 28 State of the Union speech.

While there is little hope of congressional action on climate change in the near-term, “President Obama still has the bully pulpit,” Angela Anderson, the Union of Concerned Scientists' climate and energy program director, wrote in a Jan. 24 blog post. “He has only just begun using it in earnest to mobilize the nation on climate change, but it is beginning to work,” she wrote, noting that there are only a few moments a year, including his address to Congress, “when the president can traditionally command our attention when it comes to important issues.”

“Taking climate seriously—and talking about it publicly—can go a long way toward helping the nation understand the facts and the risks that come with a warming world,” Anderson wrote.

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