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Public Relations Battle Begins Over US Climate Policy

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Abstract (Summary)

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Full Text (407 words)

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Congress may be in recess, but the debate over US climate policy has not died down. The oil industry and other business groups opposed to the Waxman-Markey cap-and-trade emissions bill are squaring off against environmental groups and other proponents of the legislation in a public relations battle that is intensifying by the day.

The debate has turned nasty with the oil industry accused of "astroturfing" -- manufacturing rallies attended by its own employees to create the appearance of a grassroots campaign. Greenpeace has released an internal memo from the American Petroleum Institute (API), the industry's top lobby group, asking members to send employees to "Energy Citizen" rallies targeting US Senators in 21 states.

Employees of Chevron, Anadarko, ConocoPhillips and other US oil companies were recently bussed to Houston's Verizon Wireless Center to hear billionaire Drayton McLane attack President Obama's clean energy agenda as an economy-destroying energy tax. Of the 21 planned rallies, 15 are reportedly being organized by registered oil industry lobbyists.

The Waxman-Markey bill, which aims to cut greenhouse gas emissions 83% by 2050, narrowly passed the House of Representatives earlier this year (PIW Jul.6,p7). It faces a much stiffer test in the Senate, where Majority Leader Harry Reid has delayed taking up the bill until late September. That has given special interest groups more time to press their case, taking the issue directly to the public.

Energy Citizen, backed by API, is a coalition that also includes the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturing, coal groups, the trucking industry, the agricultural sector, and small businesses. It has been playing the economy card hard, arguing that the Waxman-Markey bill will "drive up the price of energy, deter American job creation and send jobs overseas and bring greater stress to a still struggling economy."

The economy has taken center stage in the debate over the bill, which is being labeled as a destroyer of jobs by its opponents and a creator of jobs by its supporters. The camp that best articulates and broadcasts its position to the public is likely to swing wavering Senators who hold crucial votes.

Some large oil companies, including BP, Royal Dutch Shell and Conoco, support the idea of a cap-and-trade climate policy. But all of them were disappointed when the final details of the House bill came out and oil refiners were allocated just 2.25% of the available free emissions allowances, compared with 35.5% allocated to the power sector.

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