

Wall St. Journal

Some Senate Democrats Join GOP Effort to Ease Drilling Ban

August 1, 2008

A growing number of Democrats are banding with Republicans to push proposals that would relax the current federal moratorium on offshore exploration and production of oil and natural gas. Today in the Senate, a so-called Gang of 10 lawmakers – five Democrats and five Republicans led by Sens. Kent Conrad (D., N.D.) and Saxby Chambliss (R., Ga.) - is announcing legislation that would relax oil-and-gas leasing bans on the outer continental shelf, coupled with conservation and alternative energy measures.

Separately, in the House, a bill introduced this week by Reps. Neil Abercrombie (D., Hawaii) and John Peterson (R., Penn.) would overturn the current ban and direct a portion of royalties collected from oil companies toward renewable energy and conservation programs, as well as heating assistance for the poor.

The maneuvering reflects some Democrats' frustration with the party leadership's opposition to overturning the ban. Lawmakers are about to begin their August recess without having passed any legislation to reduce gas prices. Meanwhile, some polls indicate growing support among voters for offshore drilling, even in coastal states such as California and Florida.

"If we're going to go to talk to the American worker and say we're looking out for their interests, to automatically dismiss the idea that it's possible to drill in the OCS in a way that will be environmentally safe . . . I think that will harm us politically," Abercrombie said in an interview.

The Christian Science Monitor

Congress deadlocked on ways to lower gas prices

JULY 26, 2008

WASHINGTON - With a gallon of gas hovering at \$4 a gallon and energy prices the No. 1 issue on voters' minds, congressional leaders are increasingly deadlocked over what to do. In response, frustrated rank-and-file members on both sides of the aisle are stepping up efforts to find common ground. Two potential solutions fell short on key votes this week. On Thursday, the House rejected a measure that would have released about 70 million barrels of oil from the nation's Strategic Petroleum Reserve. On Friday, Senate Republicans blocked a move that would have led to a vote on a bill to stop excessive speculation in energy markets.

Both foundered on the same issue: whether to lift a congressional ban on exploration and drilling in protected offshore areas and in the Arctic wilderness.

Republicans are eager to lift the ban and promote more drilling. It's one of only a few GOP issues that appears to be gaining widespread support among voters.

But for Democratic leaders, the issue is politically toxic. Senate and House Democrats in hard-hit states, such as Michigan and Ohio, want to lift the ban. Those representing coastal districts generally oppose it.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi says she will not allow a floor vote on offshore drilling. President Bush lifted an executive ban on offshore exploration on the outer continental shelf on July 14 and challenged Congress to lift its own ban.

"What the president would like to do is to have validation for his failed policy. I'm saying that that's not something that will come easily to him," she said in a press briefing on Thursday. She says that the White House and oil companies must first "exhaust other remedies," including drilling onshore in the 68 million acres already open to exploration and drilling.

On the Senate side, majority leader Harry Reid prevented minority Republicans from offering amendments on the "Stop Excessive Energy Speculation" bill, including a proposal to lift the ban on offshore drilling. "Republicans once again have run away from an opportunity to provide a short-term solution to our energy crisis," he said after the vote.

The issue also plays into the presidential campaign.

Sen. Barack Obama, the likely Democratic presidential nominee, opposes offshore drilling in protected areas. Lifting the congressional ban would "merely prolong the failed energy policies we have seen from Washington for 30 years," he said in a statement after Mr. Bush's July 14 order lifting of the executive ban.

Republicans say that a Senate vote on the issue would expose the Democrats' divisions and embarrass Senator Obama. "Senator Reid can't allow a vote that will put Senator Obama in a tough spot," says Don Stewart, a spokesman for Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell.

With Democratic leaders not allowing Republicans to add amendments to the energy-speculation measure, all but two Republicans voted against limiting debate on the bill Friday, delaying a vote on the bill itself.

With leaders on both sides of the aisle digging in for a long siege on offshore drilling, other lawmakers are reaching across party lines for a fix.

Next Tuesday, a bipartisan working group plans to go over a final draft of a comprehensive energy plan, which includes the lifting of the ban on offshore drilling. The plan locks in 40 percent of royalties from new leases on the outer continental shelf for conservation, research on renewable energy, environmental cleanup, and funding for low-income energy assistance, says David Helfert, a spokesman for Rep. Neil Abercrombie (D) of Hawaii, a cofounder of the working group with Rep. John Peterson (R) of Pennsylvania.

"We are not just talking about alternative energy and renewables, we are paying for them," Mr. Helfert adds. Royalties on leases in areas now covered by a congressional ban are estimated to be \$2.6 trillion over the next 10 years, he says.

"We expect there will be a groundswell of support behind this plan in Republican and Democratic circles, because no one wants to go home in August and be portrayed as the do-nothing Congress," says Patrick Creighton, a spokesman for Representative Peterson.

Rep. Nick Lampson (D) of Texas, who worked with the Democratic leadership on this week's failed bill to tap the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, is now pursuing his own version of an offshore drilling bill. His proposed legislation would dedicate all \$2.6 trillion in expected royalties to research on alternative energy.

The Hill

Exclusive: Politicians Begin to Wake Up to Energy Crisis

July 22, 2008

With the rising cost of fuel adversely affecting Americans of all walks of life, we now look to Congress for leadership on this vital issue. While it may seem that such leadership is in short supply and that partisanship – and keeping one's elected position – has become more important than serving the needs of the American people, there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon. Last week, a bipartisan group of lawmakers got together for the initial meeting of the House Energy Working Group. Reps. Neil Abercrombie (D-Hawaii) and John Peterson (R-Pennsylvania) issued a statement on the direction of the group:

“We are very pleased at the level of commitment among the group of 23 Republicans and Democrats from all parts of the country that were able to attend the first meeting and begin working together to develop a real national energy plan.

“It is abundantly clear that the public is tired of the partisan rhetoric coming out of Washington. They want solutions. This working group recognizes that politics as usual will not solve our national energy crisis. A comprehensive approach must include regulatory reform, increased domestic production, conservation and real investment in renewable and alternative energy technologies. These are all part of America's energy future.

“Upon adjournment of our initial meeting, we have renewed hope that working together – across the aisle – Congress can put differences aside and act in the best interest of the nation, regardless of party affiliation.”

The House Bipartisan Energy Working Group plans to meet regularly to develop consensus legislation that will be introduced prior to the August recess. Membership is comprised of rank-and-file Republican and Democrat Members who are committed to accomplishing one goal: a comprehensive, environmentally responsible energy plan for the American people.

This is welcome news. Numerous polls, including this one by FamilySecurityMatters.org, show that a majority of Americans are tired of the current Congressional impasse and favor domestic drilling. In fact, a majority of respondents to the FSM poll indicated that ecological concerns should take a

back seat to the national security implications connected to our heavy dependence on Middle Eastern oil.

For too long, politicians have been playing the tune composed by special interest groups and ignoring an energy crisis that has been many years in the making. Back in April of 2001, President Bush repeatedly warned Congress and the nation that such a crisis was looming, and was in favor then of opening certain federal lands for oil exploration. He recently stepped up to the plate, rescinding an executive ban on offshore drilling and encouraging Congress to get with the program.

Yet today, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid is busy declaring that oil makes us sick and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi is looking for a quick election year fix by urging President Bush to tap the nation's strategic oil reserve – a reserve that exists to keep our government and military going in the event of a national catastrophe. This shortsightedness shows an appalling lack of judgment that should concern all Americans.

There have also been calls to enact a “windfall tax” on oil producers – one assumes to “punish” them for making money. Not only is this a violation of free market principles but it would backfire, as oil companies would simply pass on the additional cost to the consumer. And mandating the use of ethanol has had another unintended and unpleasant side effect – a sharp rise in the cost of food at home and around the world.

Yes, we should be looking for viable alternative fuel sources, and private companies around the nation are doing just that. But should our economy be allowed to grind to a halt in the meantime because of outmoded concerns about oil exploration and drilling? There have been significant improvements in drilling technology in recent decades – not to mention that drilling at home is much more ecologically sound than transporting oil thousands of miles in tankers that can leak or sink.

We applaud those House Representatives who are reaching across the aisle in order to find a workable, viable solution to the looming energy catastrophe, and we urge the leaders in Congress to take a page from their book. Swift, decisive action is needed now.

United Press International

Congress seeking energy consensus

July 16, 2008

WASHINGTON, July 16 (UPI) -- A bipartisan group in Congress is working to put together a package of legislation that will address the upheaval in the U.S. energy market.

A leader of the effort, Rep. John Peterson, R-Pa., said Wednesday that the current energy situation posed a greater threat to the United States than terrorism.

The Hill, a Washington newspaper, said Peterson made the statement during a C-SPAN interview in which he urged a consensus on legislation that could actually make it out of Congress rather than being suffocated by political bickering.

Peterson, who isn't seeking re-election in November, said the planned package would be broad in scope, but added, "We can't do everything."

Peterson's ally in the project, Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii, said in the same interview that a showdown on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska wouldn't be part of the proposals due to its political volatility, The Hill said

National Journal

Centrists Might Be Moving Party Leaders

Wed. Jul 16, 2008

As the role of moderates in both parties might be on the rise in the debate over gas prices, the early stages of detente could be forming between Senate Democratic and Republican leaders on how to at least proceed on the issue.

House and Senate coalitions of centrists that were formed to work on compromise plans on gas prices were built on growing frustration among the rank and file -- and voters -- over political gamesmanship employed by party leaders.

This might be leading to more access for these members to party leaders in the debate. House Speaker Pelosi met Tuesday with a group of oil-patch Democrats who recently voted against her "use-it-or-lose-it" plan targeting a lack of production on existing federal areas open for oil and gas production.

She met later in the day with a partially overlapping batch of Blue Dog Coalition members on how they could support a revamped use-it-or-lose-it package heading to the floor Thursday.

"I've seen a shift in leadership," said Texas Rep. Gene Green, who heads an informal batch of oil-patch Democrats and was among those who met with Pelosi Tuesday. "And I'd like to see even more of a shift."

Green said the concern from his group is how you define the requirement in the use-it-or-lose-it bill that oil companies have to be "diligently producing" their existing leases or lose out on getting new production leases.

"We're trying to define 'due diligence' so where it's just not open-ended so that it would reflect the market conditions at the time," Green said.

A Pelosi spokesman said lawmakers made suggestions for Thursday's bill at the oil-patch meeting and she "was very receptive to these suggestions and we're working with Chairman Rahall to see what changes can be made." Natural Resources Chairman Nick Rahall sponsored the use-it-or-lose-it bill, which failed to get the two-thirds support necessary under suspension of House rules just before lawmakers left for Independence Day recess. Most Republicans joined 19 Democrats in defeating it.

Oil-patch Democrats and Republicans have argued that companies would be foolish to sit on and not produce on leases when the price of oil is as high as it is, which is what Democrats are accusing them of doing in order to keep prices high.

Green's group is working on a plan that includes their use-it-or-lose-it codifications, as well as opening up additional areas to drill for oil and gas in federal waters and addressing excessive speculation in the oil futures market.

Green said the oil-patch Democrats back at the end of June decided to be "proactive instead of just voting 'no' " to energy bills their party leaders were espousing.

A slightly overlapping group of about two dozen rank-and-file House Democrats and Republicans gathered Monday night for an inaugural meeting intended to bypass party leaders and come up with a set of energy items that would also be framed around the idea of expanding areas in federal waters open for oil and gas drilling.

The goal of the effort -- led by Reps. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii, and John Peterson, R-Pa. -- is to have a working draft of ideas to package together in one or multiple bills very quickly, possibly by the start of next week, Abercrombie said.

More than two-dozen members in the two parties are submitting proposals for consideration, which comes after a "wonderful meeting that contained not one rhetorical flourish, Abercrombie said. "It was a pleasure. It was legislators legislating. I haven't seen a lot of that lately."

In the Senate, a 10-person centrist group there is working toward agreeing to a framework of a bill and drafting it during the August break that would address oil, gas and renewable energy production, conservation, speculation and other issues.

Such efforts might be melting the ice between the two Senate party leaders.

A day after he rejected the notion of allowing Republicans to offer amendments to an upcoming market speculation bill that would increase offshore drilling and touch on other energy items, Senate Majority Leader Reid Tuesday left the door open for that possibility.

"If we get on the speculation bill, we'll take a look at ways to amend that," Reid said. One Republican aide noted that this is still a far cry from saying that he will actually allow amendments.

Senate Minority Leader McConnell said he was optimistic. "We are obviously going to insist on an open amendment process that gives everybody an opportunity to have their say," McConnell said. "I'm optimistic that's what [Reid] has in mind anyway."

Reid said he wants to bring a speculation bill to the floor right after the Senate finishes debate on a global AIDS bill. "We hope to have a good, bipartisan bill on speculation in the next few days. We've worked hard on that and we're -- I think we're there," he said.

Senate Majority Whip Durbin Tuesday said Democrats hoped to have a speculation bill to put on the floor schedule by the end of that day. He said his bill -- which incorporates ideas from Sens. Carl Levin, D-Mich., and Dianne

Feinstein, D-Calif., and others -- will likely be used as the base text. "I think that's going to be a pretty common starting point," he said.

Senate Republicans have touted their broader energy package -- which includes speculation language but opens more federal waters to drilling and overturns a ban on producing Western oil shale. Democratic leaders continue to call on President Bush to release oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, an idea he dismissed Tuesday.

While House -- and perhaps Senate -- centrists have signaled they want to move ahead with a plan to expand offshore energy production, it might be too contentious of an issue even with the current concern over gas prices. "They're walking into an extremely sensitive area," Durbin said.

Honolulu Advertiser

Thursday, July 31, 2008

House OKs \$553M for Hawaii military projects

(WASHINGTON) The Army's Schofield Barracks would receive \$279 million for new buildings, roads, water lines, sewers and other upgrades next year as part of the \$553 million in construction spending the House approved today for Hawai'i military bases next year.

The Hawai'i money is part of a \$118.7 billion appropriations bill, approved on a vote of 230-186, for military construction, the Veterans Affairs Department and other military health and housing programs next year. The next step is Senate consideration of the bill, which may occur in September when Congress returns from its August recess.

"By addressing the military readiness crisis — equipment, manpower, training and facilities — these funds will have a large and direct impact on Hawai'i-based troops and military installations," said U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawai'i, a subcommittee chairman on the House Armed Service Committee. The \$279 million for Schofield Barracks includes a brigade complex, two battalion complexes, a barracks and water, sewer, roads and other infrastructure to

support additional support units as part of an overall increase in the size of the Army.

At Pearl Harbor, the Navy would use \$45 million to renovate Building 1337 into a new indoor fitness center including basketball, volleyball, racquetball and handball courts, locker rooms with sauna and a martial arts room. Other projects include:

- \$41.1 million to continue construction of a drive-in magnetic silencing facility at Pearl Harbor to help submarines maintain their stealth.
- \$40 million for a new Army satellite communications operations center in Wahiawa.
- \$29.3 million for child development center at Naval State Pearl Harbor.
- \$28.9 million for a Pacific Missile Range advanced radar detection laboratory.
- \$28.2 million for an enlisted barracks at the Marine Corps base in Kane'ohe Bay.
- \$27.7 million to replace a fuel pipeline at Pearl Harbor.
- \$19.2 million for an Army reserve center at Fort Shafter.
- \$9 million to continue construction of Saddle Road in the Pohakuloa Training Area.
- \$6 million to grade and pave about 2.8 acres for a deployment staging area at Pearl Harbor to be used by the 25th Infantry Division, including the new Stryker Brigade.

Honolulu Advertiser

June 22, 2008

Bush Powers Not Unlimited After All

By U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie

The Supreme Court of the United States has delivered another stunning rebuke to the Bush administration's belief in the president's unlimited ability to suspend fundamental constitutional rights.

The Supreme Court upheld the right of an individual incarcerated for a crime to be formally charged and to know the basis for the charge. An individual's protection against unlawful detention, known as due process rights, was deemed so important by our forefathers that it's the only individual right written into the text of the Constitution. Long before then, the concept of habeas corpus was a

bedrock principle of English common law, the basis for much of our system of laws and justice, and was recognized at least as far back as King Edward I in 1305.

It wasn't until this century that George W. Bush decided the president of the United States had powers above and beyond the law, and could unilaterally set constitutional protections aside. And, he also decided that the federal courts didn't have the power to review such issues. As a result, a number of suspected terrorists have been held in the Guantanamo prison without being charged for as long as six years.

But, it turns out that federal courts, especially the U.S. Supreme Court, do have the power to review the constitutionality of government actions. Actually they've had it since the Marbury v. Madison decision 205 years ago. When today's nine justices reviewed the Bush administration's suspension of habeas corpus for "enemy combatants," a majority found it to be unconstitutional.

Why is this important? What's the problem? What will we say when Americans are held for years without charge in some foreign prison? Why should any other country listen when the U.S. preaches to them about human rights while we're using torture as an interrogation technique and illegally detaining prisoners? What does it do to America's standing in the world?

Writing for the majority of the court, Justice Anthony Kennedy said, "The laws and Constitution are designed to survive, and remain in force, in extraordinary times. Liberty and security can be reconciled; and in our system reconciled within the framework of the law."

Does this decision mean that terrorists, or terrorist suspects, will be turned loose to prey on us? Absolutely not. But, it does mean they have the right to be charged with a crime, to see the evidence against them, just like the most dangerous criminal. And, if the evidence supports it, they should be tried. If they're found guilty, they should be punished.

At long last, preliminary hearings have begun in Guantanamo for a few of the accused. Five suspected senior al-Qaida detainees have been charged, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the alleged mastermind of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, who was transferred to the prison camp in 2006.

So clearly, our legal system can work — even with suspected terrorists — if our leaders don't try to short-circuit the process. And if they do try to reject the process and create their own legal system, the Supreme Court has to bring them back to earth. This time, it did. And, we should all be relieved.

KHNL Channel 8

New change in Medicare program helps doctors and patients

June 26, 2008

WASHINGTON, D.C. (KHNL) - Congressman Neil Abercrombie announced a new change to the Medicare and Medicaid program on Tuesday, a change that should help both island patients and doctors.

"The Medicare Improvement for Patients and Providers Act, passed overwhelmingly today in the House of Representatives, takes several important steps to improve the delivery of Medicare and Medicaid services in Hawaii," Abercrombie said.

The Act plans to ensure that doctors are reimbursed for treating Medicare and Medicaid patients. This new bill blocked a former bill that proposed a 10% cut in the amount doctors were to receive for patient services. Some in the medical field believed the proposed financial cut which was to take effect July 1, would have threatened to undermine access to care for Medicare patients.

There is speculation that some hospitals have been losing money from treating both the uninsured and Medicaid patients. Such a financial loss could threaten a hospital's ability to remain open. Both Hawaii and Tennessee were excluded from a federal program that reimburses treatment for the uninsured and Medicaid patients.

Plans to further change the Medicare and Medicaid program are still being hashed out in Congress. Tuesday's passing of this legislation will allow more time until the program can be changed permanently.

The current changes in the Medicare Improvement Act are;

Medicare providers that charge 12% more than regular Medicare services will be lowered.

Doctors and medical service providers who fail to file their taxes on time will have their back taxes deducted from any Medicare reimbursements they receive.

Mental health services will have the same co-payment as any other doctor visit.

Abercrombie adds, "This bill also provides needed help to lower income Medicare recipients."

The Act is hopefully a prescription for the health of hospitals and patients.