

Regulating cow emissions

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WASHINGTON - The satirical poster shows a cow wearing a gas mask over its face and a tube coming out of its hind quarters.

A caption describes the set-up as an alternative to the "cow tax."

The poster is a prop used by Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., and "cow tax" is a term used by the Omaha congressman and others who say they're worried that pending legislation to regulate greenhouse gas emissions from power plants and factories could also be applied to the, er, natural emissions produced by livestock.

The legislation, known as "cap and trade," would put a limit on the production of greenhouse gas emissions from major sources, and cattle are a major producer. It also would require those operations to obtain allowances for the emissions that they produce.

Proponents say the approach is an effective way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate the devastating toll that climate change already is starting to take on the planet and humans.

Democratic House leaders are trying to move the bill to the floor for a vote in the near future, but they met resistance last week from farm groups and lawmakers from rural areas worried that the measure will raise energy prices and jack up the cost of fertilizer, tractor fuel and other farm essentials.

Ultimately, the bill's success may rest on support from farm country. House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson has said that he can line up dozens of Democrats from

rural areas to vote against the legislation if they are not satisfied with it.

Among the items on the agricultural wish-list:

- Additional support for corn-based ethanol.
- More explicit exemptions from the emission limits.
- More involvement by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

That last item is especially important when it comes to how carbon credits would be treated under the legislation.

Proponents of the bill say such credits, or offsets, could mean a windfall for farmers. Farmers who adopt environmentally sensitive farming practices would receive the credits, which they could then sell to industrial operations trying to meet the requirements of the cap and trade system.

But at a hearing last week, Peterson brought up recent Environmental Protection Agency estimates that showed less potential for such agricultural carbon credits than expected. That's an example of why members of the committee would rather see the farm-friendly Agriculture Department handle the credits.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack appeared before the committee and made a case for the cap and trade concept. He said the potential benefits for agriculture in the legislation outweigh the costs, a claim that prompted plenty of questions from committee members.

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., suggested to Vilsack that by raising the cost of farming in the

United States, the legislation would send agricultural operations overseas.

Vilsack said that's why it's important to structure the system in the right way.

Fortenberry also pressed Vilsack on the idea of a cow tax, but Vilsack responded that he was not supportive of such a concept and that it's not what's intended under the legislation.

Rep. Adrian Smith, R-Neb., raised questions about carbon credits and basing them on planting trees. He said later that he felt like backers of the bill won't give any details about how agriculture can really benefit.

"They won't really exempt agriculture, but yet they won't provide a pathway for a lot of producers, farmers and ranchers, to access these credits," Smith said.

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, has vowed to oppose any cap and trade bill and pointed to a study by the conservative Heritage Foundation that predicted a downturn in farm income under the proposed legislation.

Dan Lashof of the Natural Resources Defense Council, a key supporter of the legislation, said that farmers simply aren't going to be covered by the new emissions regulations.

He pointed out that the regulations only apply to sources producing more than 25,000 tons of emissions per year. That exempts all but a small number of truly massive livestock operations, he said.

Terry said, however, that the bill would allow the EPA to examine the cumulative effect of small emissions sources after a couple of years and pursue new regulations.

Lashof said that it's simply not politically feasible to apply the emission caps to agriculture.

"This kind of scare idea that somehow we're going to require farmers to cap emissions from their cattle herd - this fantasy is not what the bill does," Lashof said.

He stressed that the legislation includes a variety of benefits for farmers, such as the carbon credits, which will help make up for any increase in their input costs.

"There are huge opportunities for agriculture here," Lashof said.

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