

Even as some House Democrats [moved closer last week](#) to installing first-of-a-kind limits on the carbon emissions blamed for global warming, others are in a full-court press to kill a separate White House effort to curb those same greenhouse gasses.

The episode is just the latest in a series of confrontations between liberal Democrats who favor strict emission-cutting reforms and a number of moderates who have sided with the various industries that would be affected by the changes. Unfortunately for environmentalists, the moderates, thus far, are winning the fight.

On Thursday, for example, the Energy and Commerce Committee passed sweeping climate change legislation sponsored by Chairman Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) -- but not before the proposal [was diluted](#) to satisfy panel Democrats representing the coal, oil and automobile industries. As a result of the changes, many environmental groups are opposing the Waxman bill outright.

In the latest episode, most members of the House Agricultural Committee contend that [newly proposed White House emission rules](#) for biofuel producers would hobble the industry and increase the nation's reliance on imported fossil fuels. Similar to the earlier E&C debate -- where key Democrats leveraged their votes in order to water down Waxman's bill -- many of the Democrats on the Agriculture panel are poised to join Chairman Collin Peterson (D-Minn.) in opposing the Waxman bill unless something is done to eliminate the biofuel rules being proposed by the White House.

The saga is emblematic of the difficulty facing environmentally minded lawmakers as they push reforms opposed by enormously influential industries like those found in the energy and agriculture sectors. It also highlights the difficulty of moving such reforms in the middle of a recession when any actions imposing additional costs on industry -- even if they're done in the name of public and global health -- are quickly labeled job-killers. In what is quickly becoming a common theme in Washington, the Obama administration's plans to cut emissions are running smack into an industry buzz saw that they just might not escape.

The new White House proposal, unveiled by the Environmental Protection Agency this month, aims to shift the country away from foreign oil by mandating an increase in renewable fuel usage -- to 36 billion gallons by 2022, up from 9 billion gallons in 2008. In a controversial move, EPA has also outlined a plan -- mandated by Congress in 2007 -- for ensuring that the shift to biofuels won't unintentionally hike carbon emissions elsewhere. For example, there are fears that increasing the U.S. production of corn for ethanol -- once the darling in the renewable fuels debate -- would lower food supplies on the global market. In that case, EPA's model is designed to account for deforestation by overseas farmers who might be forced to expand cropland in response to higher food costs. Those fuels failing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by certain amounts relative to the gas and diesel they would replace would no longer be eligible for federal subsidies.

Appearing last week before the House Appropriations environmental subpanel, EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson told lawmakers that the agency "did propose to take into account indirect land use because that's what the law required us to do."

Although the proposal exempts most corn ethanol from the so-called "indirect land use" requirements, the biofuels industry and its congressional champions are up in arms. Peterson, who voted for the 2007 energy bill that mandated the EPA's new rules, [said Thursday](#) that the proposed limits "are short on science and long on obstructive and excessive restrictions for domestically produced biofuels." Tom Buis, who heads Growth Energy, a biofuels lobbying firm, told House lawmakers Thursday that "it's about the most bizarre concept I've ever heard." Bob Dinneen, president and CEO of the Renewable Fuels Association, said the EPA is preparing to penalize ethanol producers for overseas decisions "over which our industry has absolutely no control." And Carlos Riva, president and CEO of Verenium Corporation, a cellulosic ethanol company, said the EPA is "putting stumbling blocks in front of the infant before it's learned to walk."

The concerns are timely. Following the passage of the Waxman bill through Energy and Commerce, Democratic leaders must decide how to bring it to the floor without diluting it even further. On Wednesday, they dodged a bullet when the panel killed an amendment, sponsored by Nebraska Rep. Lee Terry (R), that would have prevented the EPA's indirect land use proposal from ever taking effect.

Peterson, for his part, is pressing for the entire bill to pass first through his Agriculture Committee, where members would surely be more successful than Terry in killing the land use provision. Indeed, Peterson and Rep. Frank Lucas (Okla.), the senior Republican on the Agriculture panel, have already introduced legislation to do just that.

Waxman's office said Friday that it will be Democratic leaders who decide how the bill will reach the floor. Peterson's office did not return calls for comment.

If opponents of the indirect land use proposal are successful in stripping it out, environmentalists argue, it would spell bad news for the fight against climate change.

Kate McMahon, an energy policy expert at Friends of the Earth, was quick to point out that the EPA's proposal is intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, not prop up biofuel industries that might be contributing to the problem more than they're solving it. "If we're going to call these advanced biofuels," McMahon said, "then they should be better than what's already out there."

The EPA's proposal is similar to new emissions standards adopted by California in April. The California framework rates the "carbon intensity" of the various fuels imported into the state -- everything from oil squeezed from the tar sands of Canada to corn ethanol produced by coal-fed refineries in the mid-West. The state is currently gathering data from the industries that will reveal baseline carbon intensity figures by 2010. Those baselines will then have to be reduced by 10 percent by 2020.

Like the EPA proposal, the California strategy also takes into consideration the use of food crops to create fuel -- an international land use standard designed to see to it that the cumulative effect of using the renewable isn't to add to global emissions. That international approach, said Dimitri Stanich, spokesman for the California Air Resources Board, "accounts for emissions that would overwhelm our effort to reduce climate change."

Stanich said the pushback from the corn ethanol industry is probably an indication that those companies recognize that corn-based fuels could be phased out in coming years in favor of more advanced recipes that emit fewer greenhouse gasses.

"They're feeling bullied," he said, "but [California's rule] doesn't single anyone out ... The regulation is designed to gravitate toward any of the cleanest fuels."

Even some farm state Republicans are beginning to doubt the powers of corn-based ethanol to solve the world's energy and climate change problems. At last week's Appropriations hearing with Lisa Jackson, Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.) conceded that the popular fuel is beginning to lose its luster.

"I'm not sure ethanol, in retrospect, will have turned out to have been as wise a choice as we thought when we started down this road," Cole said. "But it's got quite a political constituency behind it now."

