

A House committee approved \$54 billion Thursday in economic stimulus spending on energy projects, amid bipartisan support for the broad goals of modernizing the nation's power grid and developing renewable and alternative energy.

The Energy and Commerce Committee approved its portion of the proposed \$825 billion economic recovery plan by a vote of 34-17.

Much of the discussion centered on how to define which renewable power sources and projects would qualify for stimulus dollars, an argument that presages the coming debates on energy and climate change legislation this year.

Republicans offered amendments designed to tweak provisions in the energy title of the stimulus package. But GOP members said they were comfortable with most of the plan's spending priorities, including weatherizing and retrofitting public buildings and low-income housing.

"Overall, the energy piece is the least contentious" part of the stimulus package, said Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb. "A lot of these things are absolutely things we need to do. The smart grid, weatherization -- it is what it is. It just boils down to what's the fairest way to distribute the money."

The panel's ranking Republican, Joe L. Barton of Texas, noted that about \$25 million of the package would be spent on such priorities as renewable energy, electricity transmission and energy efficiency.

"Those are all laudable goals, and if energy funds were spent right, they might yield some real results," Barton said.

Environmental groups also expressed support for the spending plan.

"Clean energy is job No. 1 for protecting the environment and getting America back to work," said Anna Aurilio, Washington director of Environment America. "This economic recovery package will deliver more secure energy in the long term, less global warming pollution, fewer asthma attacks from air pollution, more clean lakes and rivers for drinking water, swimming and fishing, and more good jobs right here at home."

Fred Upton, R-Mich., offered an amendment designed to promote nuclear energy by qualifying "zero emissions" energy sources -- as well as renewables -- for stimulus funds.

Many Republicans say they could only support global warming legislation if it includes an expansion of nuclear power. The amendment was defeated by a vote of 214-33, though some Democrats said they were sympathetic to the aims.

"In the next two years there are going to be many jobs created in anticipation of new nuclear power plants," said Mike Doyle, D-Pa., whose Pittsburgh district is home to Westinghouse Electric Co., which designs nuclear power equipment. "It's part of the mix. Anything we can do to help that along is a good thing. Whether or not we should do that in the stimulus package is something else."

An amendment by John Shadegg, R-Ariz., adopted by voice vote, changed the legislation's definition of renewable power to include incremental hydropower. That's a debate likely to be reprised when Congress turns later this year to legislation that would require utilities to generate 15 percent to 25 percent of their power from alternative sources.

Incremental hydropower is additional power produced through increased efficiency or added capacity at existing facilities.

