

WASHINGTON -- The chairman of the House Energy and Commerce committee said he expected a joint House-Senate conference will take up legislation to increase corporate average fuel economy -- and that he was prepared for a difficult fight but confident of victory.

"We're going to win this fight," U.S. Rep. John Dingell, D-Dearborn, told a gathering of auto dealers at a speech in Washington.

In June, the Senate approved an energy bill by a 65-27 vote. It hikes fuel economy requirements by 40 percent by 2020 to a combined standard of 35 miles per gallon. Automakers have said that would cost them billions. Automakers and Dingell have backed a compromise bill that's softer than the Senate bill and gives automakers more time to comply.

Dingell said he planned to meet with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi next week about the plan for naming negotiators to hammer out an energy compromise.

In August, when the House passed an energy bill it sidestepped the issue of increasing fuel economy -- in part because of a big split in the House. More than 160 members endorsed a compromise bill -- named "Hill-Terry" after its sponsors, Reps. Baron Hill and Lee Terry. It would raise fuel economy mandates by at least 8 percent by 2022 to between 32 miles per gallon and 35 miles per gallon.

Dingell said the Hill-Terry bill "would be the basis of House discussion" in the conference committee. Dingell said the Senate bill imposes "intolerable burdens" on auto companies.

Dingell spoke at a gathering of the National Automobile Dealers Association in Washington. Dealers were holding hundreds of meetings with members of Congress during their two-day lobbying session. "You have a story to tell," Dingell told the dealers.

"The House is going to move forward to a broader (energy) bill," Dingell said, saying as early as this month he will introduce a carbon tax bill.

Such laws tax manufacturers whose products emit carbon dioxide, providing an incentive for them to voluntarily reduce their emissions.

Noting that Europe has twice tried a cap and trade system -- "they screwed it up both times" -- Dingell said legislators must carefully craft a workable system that regulate and limit greenhouse gas emissions.

Dingell reiterated that the fight over fuel economy and climate change "is the most difficult of my career."

"I go into this tussle comforted (by the support of auto dealers) ... Go get 'em," he told the dealers. "We're going to win this fight."

David Regan, the chief lobbyist for the NADA, said the strong support for Hill-Terry "was the reason fuel economy wasn't in the House bill."

While auto dealers were holding hundreds of meetings, Regan acknowledged Washington's attention isn't focused on autos.

"It's hard to get Congress to focus on any issue except Iraq right now,"

Regan said.

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