

By Darren Goode

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Rep. Lee Terry wants to be the go-to-guy next Congress on promoting natural gas.

The Nebraska Republican hopes to spearhead an effort beginning on the House Energy and Commerce Committee to find legitimate consensus on what Congress can do, if anything, to help the industry along.

"I came here on a variety of issues, but one that I've really held true to and the reason I got on Energy and Commerce was to see if we can be free of OPEC oil," Terry told POLITICO in an interview Thursday. "And so obviously natural gas provides us that opportunity."

"Can you have a policy of natural gas generating electricity and transportation at the same time?" he added. "So those are types of major questions that hopefully we'll have some clarity to. And yes, I want to be a leader in that effort."

Terry is hosting a natural gas forum in Omaha, Neb., Monday featuring senior officials of some national groups — including American Gas Association President and CEO Dave McCurdy and American Petroleum Institute chief economist John Felmy. Also appearing are high-level folk from the American Trucking Association, the Fertilizer Institute, Edison Electric Institute and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

"We've talked to a lot of these folks individually over the last year trying to get some focus. So what we thought is, why don't we put them all in the same room?" Terry said. "And we can generate a discussion and maybe get some clarity to whether Congress needs to be involved or not. Is the marketplace going to make these decisions, but are there barriers?"

Missing from Monday's forum are the same voices from the conservation and other green sectors that have fought with Terry and other House Republicans on a host of measures passed by this Congress that target EPA regulations and would expand domestic oil and gas and other energy production.

And they are the same folks who have spoken out against hydraulic fracturing, which is widely viewed as the biggest unresolved issue facing the explosion of natural gas production and usage.

"We need them at the table," Terry said. "But if they're just going to say no at some point in time, why invite them? I mean we can just write them down 'no' and go on. But if they want to be practical and sit down, I want them at the table."

At the same time, Terry said, he'll do his part to try to turn a corner from a Congress where House Republicans focused their time on what became a series of political messaging bills bashing the Obama administration, and particularly EPA.

"I believe it's time to pivot and start looking forward," he said. "And I think there'll be a lot of us."

Terry was in the middle of a lot of that Republican messaging this Congress — particularly in pushing legislation authorizing the Keystone XL pipeline and chastising Obama for not doing so himself.

And he's also not making any apologies.

"Well, our cards were dealt to us by the administration and the EPA," he said. "And so there's no doubt we spent 18 months in a defensive position of having to expose the impact of the new rules and regulations."

But Republicans have to play a part in making the next Congress more productive, he conceded.

"Yes, I do think we need to, and I do think we have a responsibility," he said.

He will try to solicit help from Energy and Commerce Democrats.

"Well, obviously [Texas Democratic Rep.] Gene Green, and we'll see who else comes back," he said. "But I'll look at everybody. I don't think I'll get much help from [Energy and Commerce ranking member] Henry Waxman or [Massachusetts Democrat] Ed Markey. But once you get below that level I think people will work with me. At least have discussions with me."

It's not just Democrats who may try to thwart whatever vision for natural gas Terry ends up putting forward.

Fiscal conservatives dunked a bipartisan effort this Congress to provide incentives for natural gas vehicles, particularly the heavy-duty trucks that Terry says remain front and center in the discussion over expanding natural gas use in vehicles.

The effort was often promoted as a fight between billionaire oil baron T. Boone Pickens and the tea party-backing Koch Brothers. And Pickens now says the cheap cost of natural gas is enough to fuel the market without Congress having to do anything.

Indeed, despite a broad set of strange bedfellows in both parties and in both chambers of Congress pushing for natural gas vehicle incentives, nothing came to pass this Congress, a reality that Terry and others would have to contend with in the next Congress.

"I am cognizant of that," Terry said. "And it may come down to the first thing I'd look at if I'm drafting a bill is what are the non-economical incentives you could have out there, i.e., removing legislative barriers," he said.

But those answers are yet to come, he said.

"What we'll do is really listen to people right now," he said. "This is a first part of that process."

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