

Climate Change Lands On Agenda Of PTA

BY KATHERINE BAGLEY
InsideClimate News

School districts in California and perhaps nationwide will soon feel increased pressure from parents to teach climate science in their classrooms.

The California State Parent Teacher Association, which represents nearly 1 million parents and educators, adopted a resolution this month to urge schools to prioritize climate curriculum and improve energy efficiency, as well as to lobby lawmakers to act on climate warming.

The group plans to bring the resolution to the National Parent Teacher Association for adoption as early as next year. If that were to happen, it would mean that millions of parents in school districts across the country would be pushing for improved climate education and legislation at a time when both face serious opposition from conservative groups.

“People tend to blow off the PTA,” said Minda Berbeco, programs and policy director at the National Center for Science Education, an Oakland, Calif., not-for-profit group that works to protect evolution and climate science in schools. “But if the PTA supports something, it is hard for politicians and community leaders to go against it. It would mean going against the wishes of the majority of the parents in their state or district.”

The resolution frames the issue of climate change as a significant threat to children.

“There is broad scientific consensus among climate scientists that human activities contributing to greenhouse gases are the dominant cause of climate warming since 1950,” the document reads. “Children represent a particularly vulnerable group already suffering disproportionately from both direct and indirect adverse health effects of climate change.”

Like evolution before it, climate change has become a highly controversial education issue in recent years. Conservative groups like the Heartland Institute have launched campaigns aimed at educators and textbook publishers to promote doubt about the scientific consensus on manmade global warming.

In 2013, the National Research Council and National Science Teachers Association, among other groups, released the Next Generation Science Standards for grades K-12. The standards are the science equivalent of the Common Core for math and English. They recommend that educators teach global warming as early as elementary school and incorporate it into all science classes, ranging from earth science to chemistry.

But despite being co-written by 26 state boards of education, only 13 states have formally adopted the standards. By contrast, 46 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core. The Next Generation Science Standards have faced significant challenges in places such as Utah, Iowa,



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Michigan and South Dakota.

California has adopted the Next Generation Science Standards, so teachers are already preparing to incorporate climate science into their curricula. The California PTA will likely keep pressure on them to make sure that happens, and offer teachers its support, especially in the deep red pockets of the state. Otherwise, the organization will largely focus on the parts of the resolution that call for schools to be energy efficient and sustainable, and for legislators to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

“Parents have an incredible amount of clout, of sway over their districts,” said Leah Qusba, a spokeswoman for the Alliance for Climate Education, an Oakland, Calif.-based not-for-profit organization that works to strengthen climate science

education in high schools nationally. “If you look at some of places where boards of education have been on the fence about adopting (the Next Generation Science Standards), but ultimately decided to, the big change was when parents stepped up in support.”

Often stereotyped as being simply the organizer of bake sales and proms, the PTA has a 100-plus year history of affecting change in America’s classrooms and for children’s rights. Founded in 1897, the group has been a driving force behind child labor laws, mandatory immunizations, anti-drug education, and public health campaigns ranging from awareness of sexually transmitted diseases to testing students for scoliosis. The organization has branches in nearly every major school district in the country and is headquartered in Alexandria, Va., right next door to Washington, D.C.

The California PTA hopes to introduce the resolution at the organization’s 2016 national convention, giving it a full year to gain support from delegates in other states. Its passage is by no means a sure thing, education experts said. With the 2016 presidential election in full gear, climate change will likely be an extremely partisan issue, and the National PTA is composed of members from all 50 states and both sides of the aisle.

Even if it is adopted, there is bound to be some resistance. PTA resolutions aren’t law. Rather they guide the organization’s agenda and position statements. It would be easy for communities to ignore the resolution. Texas, for example, has a long history of rebuffing national education standards, and political and public understanding and acceptance of climate change risks is low in the state.

In addition, the National PTA’s membership numbers have dropped significantly in recent decades. The group doesn’t have the influence it once did, said William Cutler, an education historian at Temple University and author of the book “Parents and Schools: The 150-Year Struggle for Control in American Education.”

Environmental education leaders argue, however, that even if a portion of the PTA’s 4 million members follow the resolution it could send a strong message to thousands of schools to “wake up” on the issue of climate change, said Derby Pattengill, president of the San Diego Unified Council of PTAs, which crafted the climate resolution. The group represents 89 schools K-12.

Cutler is less optimistic.

“It is out of character for most PTAs to go to schools and tell them what to teach,” said Cutler, who served on his local PTA when his children were young. “Parents seldom weigh in on teachers’ curriculum because most don’t feel qualified to make those decisions.”

Vacation Plans Collide With Agenda For Senate

BY DAVID ESPO
AND CHARLES BABINGTON
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In a victory for President Barack Obama, supporters of sweeping, bipartisan trade legislation narrowly fended off a last-minute challenge Friday night, clearing the way for Senate passage and a highly unpredictable summer showdown in the House.

Legislation to prevent a lapse in the anti-terror Patriot Act and a bill to prevent a cut-off in federal highway funding also awaited action by lawmakers who covetously eyed a weeklong vacation — set to begin whenever the work was done.

The White House watched nervously as the trade bill slowly made its way, and prodded the Senate to accept a House-passed bill renewing anti-terrorism programs due to expire June 1. Spokesman Josh Earnest said that to do otherwise would put at risk “the ability of our national security professionals to keep us safe.”

The trade measure would allow Obama to make global trade deals that Congress could approve or reject, but not change. Previous presidents have had the same authority, and the administration wants it to strengthen the hand of U.S. negotiators as they pursue a 12-nation agreement among countries with Pacific Ocean coastline.

Lawmakers whose time generally is scheduled far in advance adjusted as best they could.

“It’s not the weather, it’s the Senate that’s the problem,” said Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., hoping to make it home by Saturday night for a turn as pianist with the Memphis Symphony Orchestra.

Republican Sens. Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio and Lindsey Graham couldn’t have said it any better. All three presidential contenders scrapped trips to a meeting of the Southern Republican Leadership Conference in Oklahoma City.

The trade measure had slightly more than the 60 votes needed for passage, and a final significant challenge failed narrowly, 51-48.

It came on a proposal, by Sens. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, who supports the trade bill, and Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., who opposes it. They sought to made allegations of currency manipulation subject to the same “dispute settlement procedures” as other obligations under any trade deal.

Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew warned earlier that its approval could cause Obama to veto the legislation. The president has said it could cause the demise of the current round of talks with 11 other Pacific-area nations, and also could pose a threat to the monetary policy that is designed to help the U.S. economy run better.

Portman, who was U.S. trade representative under former President George W. Bush, scoffed at threats of a veto. “I don’t think so,” he said in remarks on the Senate floor.

“I think he (Obama) understands the importance” of his ability to conclude trade deals without congressional changes.

An alternative proposal backed by the White House merely stressed the importance of U.S. negotiators seeking ways to end the practice of currency manipulation, which can lower the price of foreign-made goods and place American-made products at a competitive disadvantage. It cleared on a vote of 70-29.

Like most trade bills, the one currently in Congress crossed party lines. Republicans and about a dozen Democrats supported the overall measure, which they argue would lead to more exports overseas by U.S. companies and more jobs at home.

Opponents include many labor unions and most Democrats in Congress. They say international trade deals cost jobs at home as companies move production to nations with lower wages and more lenient environmental and labor standards.

To ease concerns on the part of some Democrats, the measure also included \$1.8 billion in retraining funds for American workers who lose their jobs as a result of exports. Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., said the program duplicated other federal efforts, but his attempt to strip out the funds was defeated, 53-35.

Many of the same issues are expected to renew themselves in the House, where Democrats are overwhelmingly opposed to the bill and many Republicans are loath to increase Obama’s power at their own expense.

The day’s agenda made for shifting Senate alliances.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, Obama’s indispensable ally on the trade bill, saw things differently than the White House on the Patriot Act legislation.

The disagreement centered on a House-passed provision to eliminate the National Security Agency’s ability to collect mass telephone records of Americans. Instead, the material would remain with phone companies, with government searches of the information allowed by court order on a case-by-case basis.

California Farmers Strike A Deal To Cut Water Use

BY FENIT NIRAPPIL
AND SCOTT SMITH
Associated Press

SACRAMENTO — California farmers who hold some of the state’s strongest water rights avoided the threat of deep mandatory cuts when the state accepted their proposal Friday to voluntarily reduce consumption by 25 percent amid one of the worst droughts on record.

Officials hope the deal will serve as a model for more such agreements with growers in the nation’s top-producing farm state, where agriculture accounts for 80 percent of all water drawn from rivers, streams and the ground.

“We’re in a drought unprecedented in our time. That’s calling upon us to take unprecedented action,” Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the state Water Resources Control Board, said in announcing the agreement.

The rare concession from the farmers is the latest indication of the severity of the water shortage in California, which is suffering through its driest four years on record.

California water law is built around preserving the rights of so-called senior rights holders — farmers and others whose acreage abuts rivers and streams, or whose claims to water date back a century or more, as far back as Gold Rush days.

The offer potentially could cover hundreds of farmers in the delta of the Sacramento and San Joaquin

rivers, the heart of California’s water system. About 25 percent of all California river water runs through the delta, according to the state’s Department of Water Resources.

Some of the farmers made the offer after state officials warned they were days away from ordering the first cuts in more than 30 years to the senior water rights holders’ allotments.

The state already has ordered cities and towns to cut their water use by 25 percent, and it has curtailed water deliveries to many other farmers. But in recent weeks, many city dwellers and others have complained that agriculture should be made to share more of the sacrifice.

Rudy Mussi, whose family farms about 4,000 acres in the delta southwest of Stockton, reacted with mixed emotions about state approval of the deal.

“The 25 percent savings, that gives us certainty,” Mussi said. “But at the same time I’m being asked to give up 25 percent of my paycheck.”

By itself, the delta farmers’ offer would not go far enough to save shrinking waterways statewide. But if more farmers sign on across the state, California could save significant amounts of water, since the nearly 4,000 senior water rights holders alone consume trillions of gallons a year.

The agreement “is an illustration of creative practical approaches that

water managers in the state of California are taking to help get us all through this devastating drought,” said Michael George, state water master for the delta.

California produces nearly half of the fruits, nuts and vegetables grown in the U.S., but agriculture experts say they would expect only modest immediate effects on food prices from any reduction in water for the senior water rights holders. Other regions would be able to make up the difference, economists say.

Under the deal, delta farmers have until June 1 to lay out how they will use 25 percent less water during the summer. That could include irrigating their crops less or leaving some of their land fallow.

In exchange, the state gave assurances to the farmers it will not cut the remaining 75 percent of the water to which they are entitled.

“When your back is up against the wall, I guess you’ll do anything,” said Paul Wenger, president of the California Farm Bureau

Federation and an almond grower in the Modesto-area, outside of the delta. He said he is skeptical the deal will protect the farmers if the drought worsens.

Senior water rights holders last saw their water cut in 1977, but that move applied only to dozens of people along a stretch of the Sacramento River.

Ellen Hanak, a water policy expert at the Public Policy Institute of California think-tank, said senior water rights holders don’t necessarily face complete water cutoffs, as people with less venerable claims to water have endured.

“It’s important for people to realize that there are haircuts that are partial — they don’t necessarily mean shaving everything off,” Hanak said.

Any accord with delta farmers would probably rely largely on the honor system. California currently does not require monitoring or meters for superior rights holders.

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