Gore: Congress must not bicker, act now on climate

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(AP) WASHINGTON –
Former Vice President Al Gore, a leading voice on climate change, urged lawmakers Friday to overcome partisan differences and pass legislation to curb greenhouse gases.

Gore, who won a Nobel prize for his work on global warming, called the climate issue the most important ever before Congress. A Democratic bill limiting carbon dioxide and other pollution linked to a warming of the Earth will simultaneously solve the problems of the climate, economy and national security, he told a House panel.

"We are, along with the rest of humanity, facing the dire and growing threat of the climate crisis," said Gore, who argued that Congress must act to "restore America's leadership of the world and begin, at long last, to solve the climate crisis."

He said he was worried that a U.S. failure to act could lead to " a slow-motion collapse" of international negotiations on climate.

The bill Gore cited calls for a reduction of greenhouse gases by 20 percent from 2005 levels by 2020, and 83 percent by mid-century. It also would require utilities to produce a quarter of their electricity from renewable sources by 2025.

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Gore's backing comes after three days of hearings where experts, Republicans and moderate Democrats expressed concern that the bill, which would establish a cap-and-trade system to cut emissions, would drive up energy costs.

Gore, who served Tennessee in Congress, rejected any conflict between addressing global warming and economic well-being. But he urged the House panel to make sure the bill includes provisions to protect people who would unfairly face hardships, such as workers in energy-intensive industries who could lose their jobs and those who face higher energy bills.

Rep. Joe Barton of Texas, the committee's ranking Republican, argued that the proposed "cap-and-trade" system to cut greenhouse gases would cost tens of billions of dollars a year. "How in the world can we have a (pollution) trade system that doesn't cost jobs and doesn't cost the economy?" he said.

"I think the cost of energy will come down when we make this transition to renewable energy," countered Gore. He predicted "massive job losses if ... we continue business as usual, ignoring warnings and just sit and wait until oil prices go sky high again."

And he said if climate change is not addressed, costs could be much greater.

But House Republican Leader John Boehner of Ohio called Gore's testimony deserving of "another Oscar" — alluding to the recognition received by the Gore film on climate change. Boehner said the Democratic bill amounts to a "massive national energy tax on every American ....who drives a car, buys a product manufactured in the United States, or has the audacity to flip on a light switch."

And some Democrats also expressed concerns about the economic impact.

Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., said he's not convinced the draft legislation will protect U.S. jobs because other countries like China will not face the same economic burdens.

"If the United States leads, China will follow," Gore said.

He offered the panel a litany of examples of what rising temperatures are already doing to the planet. He spoke of Arctic warming, melting Greenland ice sheets, and how increasingly acidic seas are striking seashells and coral reefs with a type of osteoporosis.

The legislation's supporters also hoped former Sen. John Warner, R-Va., who co-sponsored climate legislation in the Senate last year, would give the issue some bipartisan flavor.

Appearing with Gore, Warner argued that dealing with climate change is a national security issue that must be addressed.

"This particular moment in history is critical," said Warner. "Future generations ... will look back at what we did, maybe what we didn't do."

But Warner, who retired from the Senate last year after 30 years in Congress, said there will be "a rough road ahead" if greenhouse gases are to be reduced. He cautioned against moving too quickly when technology to curtail heat-trapping emissions may not be available.

He said the Democratic proposal was not perfect, but that Congress needs to pass a bill and "establish a beachhead" in the battle against the impacts of climate change.

Warner has been a strong advocate for mandatory action to reduce greenhouse gases. But his bill, co-sponsored by Sen. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., as well as Democrats, failed to get enough votes in the Senate to break a GOP filibuster. That debate, like much of the discussion this week before the House committee, focused on bitter disagreement over the expected economic costs, and similar arguments have been made this week.

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