

Climate change course reversed - Correction Appended

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 **Correction Appended**

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Body

No one was pleased with the climate change bill that cleared the state Senate Wednesday, least of all its sponsors.

After an hourlong, sharply partisan debate, the Senate passed Senate Bill 5735 on a 29-19 vote, sending the whole idea of capping greenhouse gases back to the Department of Ecology for two more years of study.

"This bill began life as a recommendation from the governor to the Legislature for consideration of a cap and trade program," said Sen Phil Rockefeller, D-Bainbridge Island, the bill's prime sponsor. "I'm disappointed with this bill in that it does not move more aggressively, but I heard the will of the Legislature ... We are taking a step back and considering how we might develop the strategy."

"All this really does is just tell Ecology to come back with some proposal for how caps might be implemented in the future," said Sen. Craig Pridemore, D-Vancouver, who declined to add his name to the bill as a sponsor.

"The reason we don't have a more substantive proposal today is because Ecology has failed to build a consensus over the past two years," he said.

Republicans argued that even in its weakened form, the bill would hurt the state's economy and keep new businesses from establishing in Washington for fear of having to pay a tax on their carbon emissions.

"Why would we send our employers a message that a huge new tax is looming?" asked Sen. Janea Holmquist, R-Moses Lake. "We should be trying to entice businesses from other states to come to Washington. Knowing that Ecology is looking forward to implementing 'cap and tax,' no rational company would move to Washington."

Sen. Jerome Delvin, R-Richland, accused environmentalists of "pushing this greenhouse gas fraud." He said it's a foregone conclusion that Ecology will ultimately recommend a cap-and-trade program that limits and taxes carbon emissions by major industries.

Sen. Jim Hargrove, a Republican who represents the Olympic Peninsula, urged a moderate approach to climate change legislation. He harkened back to the early 1990s battles over protection of federal old-growth forests and the demonstrations loggers organized in his district to protect jobs then.

"We resisted like crazy and we got run over," Hargrove said. "We can either try to get some of our concepts into this, and make sure it doesn't adversely affect our state, or we can refuse to be a part of it."

Some Democrats also sounded a cautious note.

"We have to be careful of the signals we send to the business community," said Sen. Chris Marr, D-Spokane. Even many businesses that supported the state's first climate change bill in 2007 are now wary, he said.

Wednesday's vote came on the heels of Senate passage of a bill Tuesday night that rolls back the provisions of a 2006 voter-approved renewable energy initiative. I-937 required the state's large utilities to get 15 percent of their power from renewable sources such as solar and wind power by 2020.

Senate Bill 5840, also sponsored by Marr, passed the Senate 27-21. It would boost the renewable energy targets, but it would also make it easier for utilities to meet those targets by letting them count small-

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scale hydropower, some new forms of biomass energy, efficiencies from the operation of large hydro projects, and energy conservation.

The measure also would allow utilities to count renewable power purchased from anywhere on the Western power grid toward meeting the targets, and would exempt the state's slowest-growing utilities from meeting the targets at all.

Marr called the bill "a fair approach."

"I think the public today understands what we're doing is fulfilling the spirit of Initiative 937 while raising the bar," he said in a statement.

But Pridemore said he was "heartbroken" over the changes in the law implementing the initiative. Those changes render the targets "literally meaningless," he said.

Passage of the two bills was a bitter pill for environmental groups that have worked for three years to win meaningful climate change legislation.

The climate change bill "does nothing to ensure that we will meet our climate change targets, which are now in law," said Clifford Traisman, lobbyist for the Washington Environmental Council and Washington Conservation Voters. He called on Gov. Chris Gregoire to lobby lawmakers directly for meaningful legislation to cap carbon emissions this year.

"What we see is that this is a bill that is a work in progress, to buy us time for the governor to personally insert herself," Traisman said. Washington must set a cap on greenhouse gas emissions that would take effect in 2012 if it hopes to remain a player and influence climate change legislation regionally and nationally, he said.

Equally important is protecting the renewable energy targets voters approved in 2006, he said.

Senators who voted for the bill "rolled back a citizens' initiative that will ensure the development of new renewables in Washington state," he said. "They did it on behalf of utilities and big businesses that claimed somehow this was going to hurt their bottom line."

Traisman rejected the argument that reducing greenhouse gases and requiring utilities to include renewable energy sources in their portfolios will hurt the state's economy.

Correction

Climate change bill: Sen. Jim Hargrove, who was quoted in a story on Page C1 Thursday about climate change legislation in the Washington state Senate, is a Democrat from Hoquiam. The story misstated his political party.

It is The Columbian's policy to correct errors. Call Mary Ricks at 360-735-4550.

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