

Field Report:

What John Dingell Did on His Summer Vacation (Part One)

by Erika-Marie S. Geiss

Fall is upon us. Soon, in much of the nation, thoughts will be on home heating prices and other energy-consumption issues as the days grow shorter and, for many, colder. So it is befitting to take a look back at some events of the summer,



John Dingell

notably the two town hall meetings that Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.) held during the August recess. “Summer” and “recess” both connote a respite or vacation. But Dingell, chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, was far from it, hard at work presenting to his constituents the plan for climate change legislation as proposed in bill H.R. 3220 the weekend before the House and Senate took their summer break.

On August 7 and 8 Dingell held back-to-back town hall meetings at Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and at the Department of Science and Engineering at the University of Michigan’s Dearborn campus. An estimated 200 people, both supporters and detractors, attended each event. The most vocal protesters at both were members of Greenpeace, clad in red tee-shirts, holding protest signs and singing chants and protest songs with great zeal.

Not surprisingly, several of the same people and groups that were involved with the Re-Energize America town hall meeting in May 2007 (see *World Energy Monthly Review*, Vol. 3, No. 5) also participated in these events. Among them were Lana Pollock, president of the Michigan Environmental Council, and Dr. Orin Genderloos, professor of environmental science at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. The Dingell events were cosponsored by the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), Clean Water Action, the Ecology Center, Environment Michigan, the Michigan Environmental Council, the Michigan League of Conservation Voters and the Great Lakes Chapter of the National Wildlife Federation.

The Legislative Answer to Climate Change

Congress has presented a bill called New Direction for Energy Independence, National Security, and Consumer Protection (H.R. 3220). Introduced in the House and passed by roll-call vote on August 4, 2007, it outlines a set of legislative proposals for reducing emissions, greenhouse gases (GHGs) and other measures related to climate change. Now called H.R. 3221, on September 5 the bill was read a second time and placed on the Senate Legislative Calendar.

At the two town hall meetings, Dingell presented highlights from the bill. These include legislation to remove 10.4 billion tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) from the atmosphere by 2030, or more than the total annual emissions produced by cars in the United States, and the development of a smart electricity grid

to deliver energy in a more efficient manner, paving the way for even more intelligent use of electricity that will support such innovations as plug-in hybrid vehicles. The bill also seeks to improve loan guarantee programs at the Department of Energy to spur advanced technologies and proposes the largest investment in biofuels to date, along with promoting a much-needed infrastructure for biofuels such as E-85. (Currently in Michigan, the only E-85 pumps are at some gas stations run by the Meijer chain of superstores.) Dingell stated that after the recess, the House and the Committee on Energy and Commerce would be working on major legislation to reduce carbon emissions by 60 to 80 percent by 2050.

The committee’s aim, said Dingell, is to establish a decent price structure for consumers and to reduce CO₂ and other polluting emissions in a way that protects people, jobs and opportunities. The House’s passage of H.R. 3220, he said, shows that a measure of success has been achieved already. Acknowledging that the proposed legislation is not enough, he added that in the fall the committee will consider evaluating other legislation that has not changed since the early 1970s, including:

- the corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) standards
- a cap-and-trade system
- a carbon tax imposed upon all sectors that produce CO₂ emissions
- a reduction in the mortgage tax credit for homes over 3,000 square feet
- gas tax increases of an additional \$0.50 per gallon
- the creation of tax credits
- increased assistance to the low-income energy program
- research into renewable energy

As one of the original authors of CAFE, Dingell posited that it worked for a time but is no longer effective. “CAFE reduced fuel consumption enormously and increased fuel efficiency by almost 100 percent, but it is time for a more sophisticated approach to CAFE,” Dingell said. Regarding environmentalist dissent about proposed fuel-efficiency standards, he added: “The American consumers want what they want, and the American auto companies have to see to it that the vehicles that people want are available. The cosponsorship of legislation to increase the fuel efficiency of the American auto fleet by 40 percent to 30 miles per gallon (mpg) for light-duty trucks and to 35 mpg for autos by 2022 is what has been proposed. The UAW supports it, and it is legislation that will protect American jobs.”

Dissent among the Ranks

At the start of the program held in Dearborn, Andy Buchsbaum, director of the Great Lakes Chapter of the National Wildlife Federation, applauded Dingell and the committee for setting parameters for global-warming legislation. Buchsbaum noted

scientific findings that recommend cutting carbon emissions by 2 percent per year by 2050, culminating in a reduction of 60 to 80 percent by mid-century, to combat the worst of global warming. He emphasized that the significance of global warming and the effects of GHGs are made apparent by some of Michigan's environmental statistics. "All Great Lakes issues are being affected by global warming," he said. "In the last decade the temperature of Lake Superior has increased 4 degrees on average. Lake Erie has shrunk up to 15 percent, and levels of lakes Michigan and Huron together may decline 1 to 3 feet if we do nothing. ... It is critical to take these steps [against global warming], and the key to make them work environmentally and economically is a sound set of realistic policies."

Hugh McDermott Jr., communications director with the Michigan Environmental Council, outlined several requests. It was apparent that his agenda was set prior to the adoption of H.R. 3220, as much of what he presented was included in the legislative language, including urges for the House to mandate emissions regulations with global warming legislation, set limits on emissions and polluting, and increase the number and quality of energy-efficient choices and clean transportation options.

McDermott expressed his belief that the United States can best achieve rapid reductions in GHGs by implementing a cap-and-trade system that sets a national limit on carbon emissions by major emitters, allows companies to buy and sell emissions permits and awards companies that reduce emissions.

Dingell, however, observed that the European cap-and-trade system has not been successful despite two attempts at it, and that in the United Kingdom, Parliament now has the prospect of having to write additional legislation to make the system work. He noted that Congress is seeking to learn from the errors of the European system and will come forward with a package that works.

McDermott mentioned two keys to reaching the 60 to 80 percent reduction in carbon emissions as set forth in the bill: first, an aggressive national requirement to ensure a stock of domestically produced renewable energy from clean sources such as wind, solar and biomass; second, a commitment to 20 percent renewable energy in the nation's energy portfolio by 2020. McDermott made no mention of cleaner hydrocarbon fuels such as ultra-clean diesel from liquefied natural gas or gas-to-liquids, carbon-sequestration or clean-coal technologies. In fact, there was no mention of fossil fuels in his version of a national energy portfolio.

McDermott also criticized Dingell's auto mileage standards as "too weak" and called a commitment to nuclear energy "premature," citing it as too dangerous, too expensive and unable to compete financially with other "responsible" energy sources. Dingell, however, called nuclear energy highly effective and disagreed strongly with the notion that it is dangerous. He observed that the nuclear option is one that

will have to be pursued and that without it, there is no way the country will be able to meet its goals.

Constituents Deliver Tough Questions

The special interest groups were not the only audience members with concerns. While there was a lot of support for Dingell's passion for and desire to protect American jobs, especially those of the auto industry, audience members during the question-and-answer period asked about the day-to-day realities affected by global warming legislation. Several questions after each of the Motor City presentations centered on the auto industry and its ability to compete while meeting the proposed mileage standards. Dingell pointed out that achieving the Senate-proposed fuel efficiency standard of 54 mpg would require an American auto manufacturer to let go 60,000 American jobs, and he doesn't want to see that happen. When he asked the audience which automaker worldwide had the largest domestic fuel-efficient fleet, only a handful of people knew the answer was General Motors. That shows not only that the Big Three are already addressing the issue of fuel efficiency, but also how much the American public, even in Detroit, has bought the hype about foreign car fuel-efficiency superiority. (For more on this issue, see *World Energy Monthly Review*, Vol. 3, No. 8.) Dingell also explained that such issues as passenger safety, availability and cost of materials, and emissions requirements are important to the equation and reflected that a commitment from consumers and a change in driving and purchasing behavior also are required.

Conclusion

Clearly, climate change, polluting emissions and energy are intertwined, and how best to address them in the legislature is complex. Many factors need to be considered, including how legislation will affect the national and global economy, the energy and automotive industries, lives in general and the global environment. The program answered many questions and addressed issues of concern to the general public, industry and action groups. It also generated new ones for Congress and the committee to consider now that they have returned to session. In many ways it is also clear that at least some members of Congress have been paying attention not only to science but also to the energy and automotive sectors – and that, simultaneously, media hype has fogged the lenses of the general public. The debate about global warming has definitely shifted. It is no longer a question of whether it is happening. At this point, Congress is faced with the challenge of how best to address it in a manner that does not hurt industry, people or the environment. ♦

In part two of this report, we will hear more from the congressman in an interview.