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Strange bedfellows

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WASHINGTON — Efforts to stem America's appetite for oil, nearly two-thirds of it imported, is getting new attention in Congress with a push from an unusual coalition of environmentalists, evangelical Christians and conservatives.

The diverse groups are putting pressure on lawmakers to find ways to curtail oil use, especially in transportation, and to promote alternative fuels and new technologies less dependent on fossil fuels.

Environmentalists view reduced oil use as a way to curtail pollution and lower the risk of climate change. A number of conservatives and others argue the dependence on oil imports poses a security threat.

Both liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans in Congress are listening.

A bipartisan group of senators unveiled legislation Wednesday they said would save 2.5-million barrels of oil a day within a decade and 10-million barrels a day by 2031. The country now uses a little over 20-million barrels of oil a day, most of for transportation.

“Failure to act, we fear, will make America like a pitiful giant, tied down and subject to the whims of small (oil-producing) countries,” said Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., calling U.S. dependence on foreign oil a national security risk.

The legislation would include tax breaks, as much as 35 per cent, and loan guarantees to get auto makers to switch from producing gas guzzlers to gas-electric hybrids, advanced diesel or other alternative technologies.

It also includes new tax breaks for those who buy such vehicles for car fleets, and incentives for developing alternative fuels such as ethanol from cellulosic biomass, research into use of lightweight material in cars, and the promotion of mass transit corridors.

“We must find a way to reduce our dependence on foreign oil so America is prepared for the future,” said Sen. Evan Bayh, D-Ind., one of the bill's co-sponsors.

Among those joining Lieberman and Bayh as co-sponsors were Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo., and GOP Sens. Sam Brownback of Kansas, Lindsay Graham of South Carolina, and Norm Coleman of Minnesota.

“This is a bipartisan effort,” Mr. Brownback said in an interview. “This is just good common sense. This is where the public wants us to go. They want us to not be so dependent on foreign oil.”

While lawmakers largely rejected proposals to curtail oil use in transportation in crafting energy

legislation earlier this year, Mr. Brownback predicted political support for the new proposals. "There was a mental sea change in America when gas hit \$3 a gallon," he said.

Earlier this year, Democrats tried to include a provision in a broad energy bill that later was signed into law by President Bush, which called on the president to develop programs that would cut oil consumption by 1-million barrels a day. It was opposed by the GOP majority and defeated.

"That was seen as a mandate," said Brownback, who opposed the measure. The new approach is based on incentives to reduce oil consumption, he said.

Among those supporting the new Senate initiative are environmentalists such as the Natural Resources Defence Council and the Apollo Alliance, a coalition of labour and environmental groups.

But they have been joined by mix of neo-conservatives and members of the Christian right who view the country's continued dependence on foreign oil — especially from volatile areas such as the Middle East — as a threat to the nation's security, and in the view of some, American values.

Among those arguing forcefully that the country's dependence on foreign oil poses a security risk are former CIA Director James Woolsey and Robert McFarlane, former national security adviser to President Reagan.

A number of conservatives have formed a coalition called Set America Free which advocates a diversification of motor fuels, development of more fuel efficient cars and trucks especially hybrids, and increased research into the development of ethanol from cellulosic biomass.

Among the group's members are Gary Bauer, president of American Values; Frank Gaffney of the Centre for Security Policy, and Gal Luft, director of the Institute for the Analysis of Global Security.

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