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Boxer: Act now to curb warming

But the Senate committee she chairs is divided on the best approach to reduce emissions.

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Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton, left, and Barbara Boxer talk Tuesday during a Senate committee hearing on how to deal with global warming. McClatchy Tribune/Chuck Kennedy

A key Senate committee found broad bipartisan support Tuesday for doing something about global warming, but deep divisions remained over how to curb the emissions scientists say are contributing to the Earth's warming.

"A consensus is developing that we must take action at the federal level now," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, a California Democrat, who's presiding over her first hearing as chairwoman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

In the House of Representatives, Democrats charged Tuesday that they'd found repeated instances in which the Bush administration ordered changes to scientific studies to soften references to the cause and effect of global warming.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Los Angeles, who chairs the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, said top administration officials had sought "to mislead the public by injecting doubt into the science of global warming and minimizing the potential dangers."

Boxer said she would try to steer the Senate committee toward enacting something like California's global-warming law, which requires lowering emissions to 1990 levels by 2020. But she acknowledged she was uncertain how far she'd get.

The hearing, the first of many Boxer will hold before trying to craft a compromise bill, was limited to senators describing where they stood on the issue. Several Republicans joined committee Democrats in calling for legislation.

There was less agreement on how far and how fast Congress should go to reduce emissions from cars, power plants

and industry. The emissions, primarily carbon dioxide, contribute to global climate change by enveloping the Earth in a virtual greenhouse, scientists say.

Many Democrats and industry leaders favor "cap and trade" legislation, which would set federal emissions standards and allow companies to sell emissions credits when they fall below that standard and to buy credits when they exceed the limits.

Others want to limit mandatory reductions to power plants, which are responsible for about 40 percent of U.S. emissions. That could invite a fight with states that rely heavily on coal-fired power plants, particularly in the Midwest, or states that provide coal for them.

Another controversial issue is whether a uniform national standard should pre-empt tougher state laws, an issue that could divide California lawmakers if the deal Boxer cuts falls short of the state's standards.

Boxer kept the hearing from drifting into an ideological argument with a minority of Republican committee members who remain skeptical that human activity is at the root of rising temperatures and changing global weather patterns.

Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla. -- who was unseated as committee chairman by the November elections, which thrust Boxer into her most prominent role in Congress -- is a skeptic of global warming who was able to bottle up remedial legislation.

He didn't seriously challenge the science Tuesday. The harshest Republican critic was Idaho Sen. Larry Craig, who said the rush to enact legislation was driven by the 2008 presidential elections, which Democrats didn't dispute.

Some of the more prominent advocates of global-warming legislation are candidates for the White House. Among those speaking at Tuesday's Senate hearing were Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain and New York Democratic Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton.

At the House hearing, two private advocacy groups produced a survey of 279 government climate scientists showing that many of them say they have been subjected to political pressure aimed at downplaying the climate threat. Their complaints ranged from a challenge to using the phrase "global warming" to raising uncertainty on issues on which most scientists basically agree, to keeping scientists from talking to the media.

The survey and interviews with scientists have "brought to light numerous ways in which U.S. federal climate science has been filtered, suppressed and manipulated in the last five years," Francesca Grifo, a senior scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists, told the committee.

Drew Shindell, a climate scientist with NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, said climate scientists frequently have been dissuaded from talking to the media about their research, though NASA's restrictions have been eased.

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