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INTERVIEW-Senior House Republican sees climate bill delay

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*Republicans oppose 'cap and trade' emissions plan

*Democrats discuss how to fix regional inequities

*Republican says healthcare deal is 'doable'

By Richard Cowan

WASHINGTON, May 7 (Reuters) - Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives are likely to set aside a controversial climate change bill for a few months, giving them more time to build support and instead concentrate on a healthcare reform effort, a senior Republican said on Thursday.

"The pressure is going to build on Chairman Waxman, not to give up on climate change, but to set it aside and let it simmer a while and then go to healthcare," said Representative Joe Barton in an interview.

Healthcare reform and the environmental initiative are top priorities of President Barack Obama and the House Energy and Commerce Committee has a major role in both.

Barton is the senior Republican on that committee, which is chaired by Representative Henry Waxman, who wants to pass a climate bill in his panel by the end of this month. The legislation would force stiff new limits on industrial emissions of carbon dioxide and other pollutants that contribute to global warming.

Barton and his fellow Republicans on the committee claim to be in lock-step opposition to the "cap and trade" plan being pushed by Obama to bring the United States into an international effort on combating global warming.

Waxman and fellow Representative Edward Markey have been struggling to put together a bill that would attract enough Democratic support.

"I honestly don't see him (Waxman) getting a bill out of committee...by the end of May," Barton said.

The Texas Republican is the former chairman of the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee, losing his post when Republicans lost their House majority in the 2006 elections.

Saying he was "putting my old chairman hat on from three or four years ago" to sketch out a possible scenario for the climate change bill, Barton said Waxman and Markey might be able to pull off a deal but, "I think he sets it aside two to three months while they continue to try to put the pieces together."

CONCERNS ABOUT POSSIBLE HIGHER ENERGY PRICES

Many Democrats, especially those representing districts in the Midwest and South that rely on carbon-emitting fuels for generating electricity and have

oil refineries and heavy industries in their districts, worry that the new limits would bring higher energy prices and harm to businesses.

As part of their strategy to defeat the cap and trade plan, Republicans have been portraying it as a national energy tax proposal during an economic recession.

Waxman and Markey have been in intensive discussions with other Democrats on how to fix any regional inequities in a bill.

Representative Rick Boucher from the coal-producing state of Virginia said progress on the legislation was still being made. Boucher wants industry to receive all the new pollution permits for free, instead of the 100 percent auctioning that Obama envisioned.

Difficult negotiations also center on new standards on electric utilities for using renewable fuels to generate a certain amount of their power supplies, according to lawmakers.

Waxman's end-of-May deadline for committee action is made difficult by the fact that there are only about 10 more working days left before Congress goes on recess until June.

Even if the committee debate were to start on Monday, which is unlikely, Barton said it would be a "multi-week" effort because of the slew of amendments Republicans will offer.

"There's growing pressure in the Democratic caucus to de-emphasize climate change and emphasize health care," Barton claimed. "Healthcare is a doable deal," he said.

(Editing by Cynthia Osterman)

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