



Bipartisan energy bill aims to head off oil 'blackmail'

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Tuesday, November 29, 2005

Georgia conservative Jack Kingston and New York liberal Eliot Engel are carrying a bill aimed at reducing American dependence on foreign oil.

Kingston, a Savannah Republican and member of the House GOP leadership team, said the bill could free the United States from reliance on Middle East oil by 2015.

By that same date, the measure aims to shrink use of oil from all foreign sources by 10 percent.

"That's far short of total independence," said Bill Johnson, Kingston's chief of staff. "But it takes us to the point where we have choices. And it makes it impossible for some Middle East supplier to blackmail us."

The bill and a companion Senate measure have 30-plus co-sponsors in both parties, including Reps. John Barrow, a Democrat who represents most of Savannah, and Sanford Bishop, another Georgia Democrat.

So far, none of the committee chairmen who can make or break such bills have signed on.

But Johnson said he's not surprised by a lack of early support from chairmen.

"They have to negotiate the compromises on bills like this," he said, "so they stay away at the beginning."

The bill would provide tax breaks for automakers to produce more gas-miserly vehicles and to induce more motorists to buy them.

It also would increase tax breaks for developers of alternative fuels, especially ethanol, often made from corn or sugar.

Kingston said the United States imports nearly 60 percent of its oil from other countries.

"The list of countries we import from," he said, "reads like a 'who's who' of countries that we should not be aiding: Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Venezuela, Nigeria, Russia, and Libya to name a few.

"This leaves our national security and our economy vulnerable to threats from political instability, unfriendly governments, acts of terrorism and natural disasters."

Engel, a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee and the founder of a congressional group that promotes using technology to reduce oil consumption, made similar points.

But his spokeswoman referred most questions about the bill to Kingston's staff.

After Congress passed a major energy bill earlier this year, Johnson said, Kingston began thinking about a follow up measure due to concerns the bill lacked a plan to cut oil imports.

"He started talking to a lot of people and came up a list of eight or 10 ideas and contacted Engel (because) he's a Democrat and an expert on energy," Johnson said. "They talked about what should be in the bill."

He said they agreed not to include two divisive proposals - oil drilling in environmentally sensitive areas and requiring auto makers to meet minimum gas-mileage standards.

Johnson said there may be opposition from automakers and sugar interests worried about a provision to lift the tariff on imported ethanol.

He said committee hearings on the bill likely will be held next February or March. In the meantime, he said, backers are seeking support from the Bush administration.

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