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## Climate Activists Wait for an Obama Speech to Call Their Own

By CHRISTA MARSHALL of [ClimateWire](#)

As President Obama delivered a possible make-or-break speech on health care last night, climate change activists said they were waiting patiently for a similar rhetorical moment.

For now, advocates said, there is broad acceptance about the president's decision to push their key issue to the back burner. But many argue that Obama needs to grant climate change equal attention on prime-time television in coming months. With international climate talks in Copenhagen in December and 2010 congressional elections looming, time for a major speech is running out, they said.

"I don't have a problem with him keeping the climate powder dry for now," said Frank O'Donnell, president of Clean Air Watch, which is pushing to strengthen global warming legislation that passed the House in June. "But, ultimately, it may take a big goosing from the White House to achieve some resolution in the Congress."

Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, said she wished the president had given a parallel global warming speech already. She said Obama should make a clear statement to the public on the issue, particularly since senators are hearing from voters frightened by "myths" about \$4-a-gallon gas.

"He has to assert himself into it," she said.

In addition to following a powerful communication strategy, Obama needs to delve into the "nitty gritty" details of legislation, just as he has with health care, Claussen said. During the House debate on climate, the president followed a different strategy and largely left the climate sausage-making to the bill's authors, Reps. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) and Edward Markey (D-Mass.).

But timing is everything.

Climate speech may hinge on success of health care

Obama can't tackle two huge issues at once, Claussen said, so any climate communication push will have to wait until lawmakers are ready to hear the message. She said she hopes that will be this year or early in 2010.

A similar point was made recently by Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.), who said "if [Obama] focuses on too many different things, the public won't hear anything." Bayh is considered a potential swing vote when and if a

climate bill ever makes it to the Senate floor.

Addresses to Congress like Obama's health care speech are not unusual for presidents, but they must be made sparingly to be effective, said Julian Zelizer, a professor of history and public affairs at Princeton University. That means that a climate version would have to wait at least a month, if not longer, he said. Moreover, the likelihood of Obama's making a repeat performance on climate depends entirely on whether the health care speech is viewed as a successful turning point in his presidency.

"Two big defeats would be devastating," Zelizer said.

Adding to the uncertainty about where climate change stands on Obama's priority list, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said last week that reform of financial institutions would be a major focus on the legislative agenda in the fall ([E&E Daily](#), Sept. 8).

"That is a huge concern," said Jason Walsh of Green for All, an organization supporting "green" jobs. Like other climate activists, he urged the president to use the bully pulpit strongly as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the president has a few tools to get climate legislation moving, short of a big speech, academic analysts said.

Other tools besides the 'bully pulpit'

He could bring senators repeatedly to the White House to push them on the issue, or tour the country in states where the issue is a hard sell, for example. Edward Maibach, director of the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University, said the president should get his military advisers talking about the dangers of warming temperatures -- something they are already planning to do at a major forum today ([see related story](#)).

And, of course, there are social networking and multimedia platforms, which were considered key ingredients in Obama's presidential campaign.

Said Maibach, "He has the ability to stimulate face-to-face conversations using mobile applications on my iPhone."

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