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Bipartisan bill can help U.S. declare energy independence

By Neil Abercrombie

Congress has argued about solutions to the nation's energy crisis for decades. Yet there's been more interest in political posturing than in finding solutions. This summer, as gas prices passed \$4 a gallon, the public demanded action from their government.

Unfortunately, the only action they got was Democrats and Republicans wagging fingers at each other.

But now, after Rep. John Peterson (R-Pa.) and I convened an informal group of Republican and Democratic House members to see if we could put politics aside and work together, Congress is on the verge of enacting a real national energy policy using today's energy resources to build the alternative energy future we all want for the country. The process required compromise; not the legislation either side would have written on its own, but legislation that both sides could accept; legislation driven by logic rather than ideology; legislation that would lay out a thoughtful, sensible set of actions to address short and long-term needs. We reached agreement on an energy measure, introduced in the House on July 31, and it has attracted more than 135 Democratic and Republican cosponsors.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi agreed with us that the time had come for Congress to face the energy crisis head-on. She wanted to build on our legislation; to broaden its scope and impact. She accepted our core principle: Our national energy crisis is a lot more complex than simply drilling or not drilling for offshore oil. We need to develop our own energy resources as soon as possible so our way of life isn't left in the hands of other countries. We need to completely change the way we produce and use energy so alternative fuels

and renewable sources can power more of our daily lives: fuel our cars, trucks, aircraft and boats; cool and heat our homes, schools and offices; and generate electricity. Ultimately, the more alternative energy we use, the less fossil fuel we'll need. And that, together with practical, sustained conservation efforts, is the real solution to our energy crisis.

After many hours of work sessions with Speaker Pelosi, other leaders and members of the diverse Democratic majority, and with key Republican members, the heart of our bipartisan legislation has been captured in the Comprehensive American Energy Security and Taxpayer Protection Act. This measure will be introduced in the House early this week and voted on.

At long last, we have legislation that moves us toward U.S. energy independence. It removes the ban on offshore oil and gas drilling to allow more energy to be produced here in America, which is that much less we'll have to buy overseas. And, by the way, under the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act of 1953 (as amended), oil and gas produced in U.S. waters cannot be sold in the international market. What's produced in America stays in America.

This legislation creates the Strategic Energy Efficiency and Renewables Reserve so the billions of dollars in revenue to the federal government generated by lease payments and royalties from new offshore production can be used to pay for accelerating the use of alternative fuels and renewable energy resources, promoting energy efficiency, funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund, low-income energy assistance and weatherization.

It also redirects billions of dollars in tax subsidies from big oil companies, which are already making the largest profits in world history, to alternative and renewable energy, through:

- an investment tax credit for solar energy and fuel cells;

- a production tax credit for energy from biomass, geothermal, hydropower and solid waste;
- the production tax credit for energy from wind power;
- incentives for the purchase of fuel-efficient, plug-in hybrid vehicles; and
- incentives for energy conservation for businesses, state and local governments.

The ban on offshore drilling that's been in place for 40 years will expire on Sept. 30, and President Bush has promised to veto any attempt to renew it. That would open the entire Outer Continental Shelf to oil and gas drilling. However, under our legislation, drilling can take place only between 50 and 100 miles offshore - if the adjacent state chooses to allow leasing off its coastline by enacting state law. There are specific environmental protections required for any offshore drilling. National marine monuments and national marine sanctuaries are permanently withdrawn from oil and gas leasing; and all leasing activities have to protect the coastal, marine and human environment.

This is how we use today's energy technologies to pay for the development of our real energy future. With sustained funding, these alternative energies can be fully developed and begin to carry a significant part of our energy needs that much sooner. This is the road to U.S. energy independence.