ABC's Weekly Federal Legislative Update
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Introduction

Congress and the Whitehouse are continuing to debate the content of the next round of relief packages related to the Coronavirus. One of the biggest sticking points remains how much to provide in additional unemployment benefits. House Democrats, in the HEROS Act passed in late May included a continuation of the additional $600 per week initially provided by Congress in late March. The Republican Senate has proposed an additional $200 per week. Parties are still negotiating and trying to bridge that substantial gap. The Senate will also be taking up the nomination of Mark Menezes to be officially confirmed as the Deputy Secretary of Energy. The following is news from Washington, D.C.

Administration

EPA Headquarters and Boston Office Move Forward on Reopening

The following story contains information on EPA's plans to reopen its various locations including the HQ in Washington, D.C.

Kevin Bogardus of Greenwire wrote on July 31, "EPA headquarters and the agency's New England office are taking another step forward on reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Administrator Andrew Wheeler said in an internal email obtained by E&E News that EPA's National Capital Region offices and Region 1, based in Boston, will move into phase 2 of the reopening process Tuesday. Other smaller EPA offices will also enter that phase of reopening, Wheeler said.

"Wheeler said EPA had seen "some progress" in data trends and other information the agency has reviewed. That progress is the impetus for taking another step in reopening, he said.

"Our goal is to ensure that the decisions we make to return to work are based upon the best data available and the guidance that state and local public health agencies are

providing," Wheeler said in his email sent to EPA employees this morning. "At this point, I am confident that we should move into Phase 2."

“The EPA administrator noted the capital region and Region 1 had been in phase 1 of the plan for 39 days because the agency didn't want to move too quickly.

“Wheeler also said several smaller EPA offices are moving forward on their reopening plans.

“The following agency facilities will be moving to phase 2: Traverse City, Mich.; Duluth, Minn.; Narragansett, R.I.; New Haven, Conn.; Helena, Mont.; Buffalo, Albany and Syracuse, N.Y.; Wheeling, W.Va.; and Middleburg Heights and Westlake, Ohio, he said in his email.

“In addition, the Cincinnati and Ann Arbor, Mich., facilities will be moving to phase 1.

“Finally, the Portland, Corvallis and Newport, Ore.; St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands; and Pierre, S.D., facilities for EPA will be moving into the seven-day shutdown period.

“Wheeler said reopening plans entail "a balancing act," considering criteria data and decisions being made by state and local officials.

"Despite cities and states moving forward in their phases — on to Phase 2 or 3 several weeks back — we remain cautious and deliberate in our moves forward. I now believe our analysis supports the above locations moving forward," Wheeler said.

“Working from home is still allowed for EPA employees during this next phase of the reopening process.

"As a reminder for the locations moving into Phase 2, employees are expected to return to normal work schedules (except for those who continue to have dependent care issues), and telework is at the option of the employee but you should notify your supervisor if you choose to telework," Wheeler said in his email.

“Wheeler also reminded EPA employees if they choose to come to the office to review the agency's self-assessment questionnaire for COVID-19 and not enter an agency building if they answered yes to any of its questions.

“EPA unions have protested the agency's move to reopen during the pandemic. They say staff members have been teleworking effectively and should not risk exposure to the virus on their commute or in the office.

“Gary Morton, president of American Federation of Government Employees Council 238, which represents about 7,500 EPA employees, was frustrated by EPA moving forward on its reopening plans.

"It is disgraceful for Andrew Wheeler to use dedicated EPA employees as guinea pigs for political purposes," Morton told E&E News. "Mr. Wheeler, just following orders has never been a morally acceptable excuse or defense for not protecting human lives."

“Some of the areas named in Wheeler's email have recently sought more restrictions to stop the spread of the virus.

“Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser has issued a tough mask order and extended the city's state of emergency to October. She also announced yesterday that D.C. public schools will have an all-virtual start this year.

“EPA spokesman James Hewitt told E&E News, "As Administrator Wheeler indicates in his email, the option of teleworking rests with employees during Phase 2. All EPA facilities are evaluated weekly using data from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and other expert sources. This data is also reviewed by EPA scientific experts.

"These reviews, along with consideration of the status of the state and local reopenings, informs each decision. Any reopening will be phased in a measured and deliberate approach and transparent with all employees through our new dashboard service," Hewitt added.

“EPA employees are keeping watch on the reopening process. Its next step, phase 3, is when most staff will be expected to return to the office, although supplemental guidance allows for additional telework during that part of the process as well.

“Phase 3 will be another change for staff, according to an EPA headquarters employee who said they weren't shocked by the move forward on reopening announced today.

"Not surprising, but we have been instructed to continue to telework through phase 2, so not much has changed. The real complication will be phase 3 when we have to deal with school, child care and other services," said the employee.

"The career managers don't seem to be in any hurry to get employees back in the office."

Congress

Other

GM and EVgo Plan Giant U.S. Charging Network

The growth if the EV market could be an additional factor in digester growth as ultra-low or negative carbon intensity renewable electricity from digesters can be used to power these vehicles. The following story discusses as plan put forth by GM to build additional charging capacity across the U.S.

On July 31, David Ferris of Greenwire published, “General Motors Co. said today it will partially fund the construction of 2,700 electric vehicle fast-charging stations, the latest sign that America's largest automaker is thinking through the steps to not just make but also fuel a large fleet of EVs.

“The partnership is with EVgo, one of the largest U.S. charging networks.

“The chargers will be for public use, including ride-hailing drivers and apartment dwellers who lack a home charger, and are designed to mostly fill a battery in about 30 minutes. They will be located in about 40 metropolitan areas where the two companies see EV adoption coming soonest.

“If built, the chargers will be a vast increase in America's capacity to recharge EVs.

“The new chargers would more than triple the size of EVgo's footprint. The network also would be far larger than the plug points built so far by Electrify America, the $2 billion decadelong charging system bankrolled by Volkswagen AG as part of its penance for its diesel emissions cheating scandal.

"We've fast-forwarded our EV work and done extensive customer research," GM CEO Mary Barra told reporters on a phone call announcing the plan. "Extensive EV infrastructure is something our customers told us was important."

“Barra would not say how much GM is investing. It is also unclear whether GM and EVgo are planning to pay for the network themselves or rely mostly on others' dollars.

“The companies "designed this new endeavor to leverage private investment alongside government grant and utility programs," they said in a joint statement.

“The stations will start to open in early 2021 and will be built over the course of five years.

“The news was the latest signal that GM is serious about its EV offerings.

“The Michigan automaker is in the early stages of construction of a large battery manufacturing plant in Lordstown, Ohio, a joint partnership with South Korean battery maker LG Chem Ltd., that will make proprietary GM batteries dubbed Ultium.

“The company plans to have 20 EV models available by 2023 and on Thursday is expected to unveil the Cadillac Lyriq, its first EV since the Chevrolet Bolt was introduced four years ago.

“The partnership is a huge boost for EVgo, which has experienced mostly slow and steady growth and has suffered a huge downturn in business as travel stalled with the coronavirus pandemic.

“The new chargers are also a sign that GM envisions electric vehicles charging faster than they do today, potentially much faster.

“The stations will operate at power levels of 100 to 350 kilowatts. Most fast-charging EV stations today charge at 50 kW. The increased speed often requires much more investment by utilities in the power lines and other equipment to support it.”

Report: Carbon Dividends Would Spur Jobs, Growth

E&E Daily reporter Nick Sobczyk submitted on July 31, “The Climate Leadership Council is touting a new study that found its carbon pricing plan could spur 1.6 million jobs and more than $1 trillion in capital investment by 2035.

“The analysis, performed for the group by Thunder Said Energy, also found the carbon dividends model would reduce emissions 57% by 2035, compared with 2005 levels.

“The Climate Leadership Council has drawn attention mostly for its group of supporters, which includes luminaries like former Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz and oil majors like BP PLC, Exxon Mobil Corp. and Royal Dutch Shell PLC.

“Its plan would price carbon at $40 per ton, increasing 5% above inflation each year, with proceeds returned to the public via dividend checks.

“In exchange, the council proposes to suspend or repeal a number of EPA carbon regulations, an idea that has earned criticism from progressives who say the group amounts to a public relations campaign for Big Oil.

“Greg Bertelsen, executive vice president for the Climate Leadership Council, said the new study shows the value of the plan as innovation policy, an area that Republicans have focused on intensely as they have softened their rhetoric on climate change over the past few years.

"There is no better way to accomplish those two objectives — rapidly decarbonizing the economy while also spurring innovation and stimulating economic growth — than a price on carbon like that proposed in the carbon dividends proposal," Bertelsen said.

“And because the plan would include a border adjustment to account for carbon-intensive goods made in other countries, the study found that it would ultimately give U.S. manufacturers a competitive edge.

"Manufacturing currently occurring in Southeast Asia, or other emerging market countries, would be incentivized to return to the US, closer to the products' point of use," the analysis says.

"Manufacturing goods in the US using the most efficient and lowest carbon technologies would benefit from a border carbon adjustment," it says.

“The Climate Leadership Council and its associated lobbying group, Americans for Carbon Dividends, are hoping to get the plan introduced as a bill in Congress, though Bertelsen acknowledged it's a long road.

“For one thing, very few Republicans support carbon taxes, and one of the party's most prominent advocates for the policy — Rep. Francis Rooney of Florida — is retiring.

“Meanwhile, Democrats have increasingly coalesced around plans focused on government spending and regulation, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic sent the economy into a free-fall.

“Bertelsen, however, said the pandemic only makes the potential job creation numbers in the plan more appealing. Plus, low- and middle-income Americans would get a dividend check that would likely more than offset any rise in their energy prices due to the tax, he added.

"Our goal is still to get a bill introduced and then build support from there, but we believe the window of opportunity for real movement begins in 2021," Bertelsen said.”

This story also appears in Climatewire.

Technology: The Search for Cleaner Jet Fuel Leads to Sewage Plants

Scientists are looking for additional ways to make low carbon jet fuel. In particularly, they are examining a way to chemically alter the biological process to anaerobic digestion so that its end product is not methane, but a more potent liquid fuel and one that produces only about 50% of the CO2 emissions that jet fuel produces when it is burned. The following story provides more details.

John Fialka of Climatewire wrote on July 27, “The Department of Energy is taking a fresh look at a tough research problem that has baffled experts for more than a decade: developing a low-cost alternative to jet fuel.

“The search began around 2010, initially pushed by the Department of Defense's concerns about the United States' reliance on imported oil. More recently, airlines have raised the question themselves. They're facing potential restrictions on carbon dioxide emissions from jet airliners and the lack of a near-term, electricity-fueled replacement for their heavy planes.

“Among the more daunting aspects of the search for a feedstock to replace jet fuel is that there has to be plenty of it. The aviation industry uses as much as 1.7 billion barrels of jet fuel in a year. Any alternative to fossil fuels has to be cheap. Fuel is the airline industry's largest operating cost.

“Researchers at DOE's National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) are taking a fresh look at a promising family of new and plentiful feedstocks: animal wastes, food wastes and urban sewage sludge containing human manure.

"Everyone is beginning to see the potential of taking these organic materials that we normally have sent to landfills or wastewater treatment facilities," said Derek Vardon, a senior research engineer at NREL who is working on the problem along with other DOE laboratories and outside companies.

“Their overall goal is to short-circuit the normal processes of decay that occur in landfills or in, say, a cow's stomach that breaks down biomass. That process usually results in methane — the major component of natural gas and a significant global warmer.

“Some of the researchers will experiment with catalysts to chemically alter the biological process so its end product is not methane, but a more potent liquid fuel and one that produces only about 50% of the CO2 emissions that jet fuel produces when it is burned.

“Manure and food wastes contain carboxylic acids, a family of fatty acids that can be altered through the catalytic process to link their chain-like structures together. The results are a liquid fuel, Vardon explained, one that has as much as seven times the energy of methane. That's needed to get a heavy airliner off the ground.

"We've been working on developing technology that is industrially relevant, and we have industry advisers who are the heart and soul of this project," Vardon said in an interview. He noted that Southwest Airlines Co. and Boeing Co. are among those involved.

“Research will begin with experiments using food wastes and work on scaling up to an initial facility that can make at least a thousand gallons of fuel. The next step would be assessing its reliability as a power source for test flights.

"Some of these advances are going to happen because you need high-energy-density forces for flight, and air travel is an integral part of our society," said Vardon, admitting that it will "take more rigor to scale the process up."

“The idea is that human feces and food wastes may be the vital ingredients for this research, which has over the years focused on efforts to make jet fuel out of alcohols, sugar, palm seeds, soybeans, corn, wood chips and coal.

“That may seem shocking to some people, but other researchers are also sensing the potential of rich and low-carbon resources that could be developed in alliances with sewage treatment plants.

“One of them is Jianping Yu, the main investigator of a separate NREL project that is exploring how to remove phosphorus and nitrogen, major and troublesome water pollutants, from conventional sewage treatment processes.

“His idea is to feed the pollutants to algae in the sewage plants and then sell the algae as a product that can be made into commercial fertilizers. Algae can also be made into polymers that can be used to make a variety of materials, Yu explained, including shoes and backpacks.

“What aroused his curiosity about algae was that some strains consume considerably more phosphorus than others. They store it in their bodies for later use. He calls it a "luxury uptake" because they don't need it to survive.

“Then he learned about a company called Gross-Wen Technologies Inc. It was established by two Iowa State University professors, who had developed and patented a cheaper way to recover nitrogen and phosphorus from wastewater using algae.

“Yu's idea is to collect and develop strains of super-eaters among the algae, so they can remove as much as 50% more of the pollutants from processed wastewater.

“Growing more powerful algae, he points out, will also be a way for the plants to remove more CO2 from the air. The other ingredient that they will need is sunlight, which is also free.

“The upshot is that it could reduce the amount of energy needed to run sewage treatment plants. "That's the goal. Our main motivation is future environmental requirements," Yu said.

“Needless to say, the goal is very appealing to some of NREL's partners in this project, including the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, which is responsible for wastewater and stormwater management in Cook County, Ill.

"It's hard to overstate how exciting this is," exclaimed Debra Shore, a commissioner of the district, which is adapting its system to include the enhanced algae-producing process.”