

5. TRANSPORTATION: A congestion of advice about reducing congestion -- and emissions (12/22/2008)

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With vehicles and airplanes accounting for almost a third of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, the next secretary of Transportation will sit at the fulcrum of climate policy.

Or will he?

In introducing Rep. Ray LaHood (R-Ill.) as the next head of the department at a press conference Friday, President-elect Barack Obama didn't say whether the congressman would sit at the table when the next administration drafts its global warming policy. The focus of both men's remarks on transportation was on building and fixing infrastructure rather than on squeezing carbon dioxide out of tailpipe emissions, a point that raised eyebrows among some environmentalists.

"While Obama nominated a Transportation secretary with a record of support for clean transportation choices, we were concerned when he didn't mention climate change in his remarks," said Colin Peppard, transportation program manager at the environmental group Friends of the Earth.

"We want to see LaHood right in there with [Steven] Chu, [Lisa] Jackson, and especially [Carol] Browner." he said, referring, respectively, to Obama's choices for Energy secretary, EPA administrator and the new post of assistant to the president for energy and climate change.

Other groups expressed concern

Statistics on greenhouse gases and U.S. transportation

- Passenger vehicles are responsible for 60 percent of total transportation energy use. Air travel constitutes about 10 percent. Freight travel via trucks and ships accounts for about 20 percent.
- Since the 1980s, energy consumption for transportation has increased by 33 percent.
- Over the next 25 years, transportation is expected to drive all the expected growth in petroleum consumption.
- Over the last 30 years, the miles traveled per vehicle increased faster than the population.

Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration and the Pew Center on Global Climate Change.

that Obama's proposed job-building efforts will lead to more roads and would increase greenhouse gas output in the process. Some [questioned](#) whether LaHood's status as a Republican and his record, which includes votes against some renewable energy initiatives, would lead him to appoint staff less likely to align with Obama's stated goals.

Another green group, the Environmental Defense Fund, however, found encouragement in LaHood's statement that he "shared" Obama's agenda and the fact that he mentioned mass transit before roads in a priority list.

"The Department of Transportation does a lot of things. It's hard for a person to really get into the weeds in a short statement," said the EDF's transportation director, Michael Replogle, about the press event.

LaHood will face some early tests on how far he wants to move climate onto the Transportation Department's agenda, as the next Congress is preparing to reauthorize a massive, multi-year transportation-works bill. As one example, LaHood will play a role in determining whether new incentives are added to the legislation rewarding states and localities for reducing emissions through their land-use plans and use of alternative fuels in mass transit.

Current incentives encourage more driving

Under the current federal structure, the department rewards regions if their residents drive more, not less, said Daniel Sperling, director of the Institute of Transportation Studies at the University of California, Davis. It would help for the secretary to advocate tying money to how much areas reduce their residents' per capita vehicles miles traveled.

To do so would require updated analysis tools so localities across the country will get on the same page in measuring emissions in the first place, he noted. The Bureau of Transportation Statistics and other internal agencies don't have enough funding currently to provide that kind of direction and research, said Steve Winkelman, transportation director at the Center for Clean Air Policy.

"The issue is at the sub-state level, where there are great inconsistencies in measuring greenhouse gases in transportation," Winkelman said. "The federal government needs to provide guidance, so there is consistency in the data."

Reducing the number of miles Americans travel in their vehicles may be a tough sell, though, as a major source of revenue for the department comes from a tax on motor fuels. When people drive less or switch to fuel-efficient cars, the Highway Trust Fund loses dollars. The issue was so pressing in September that Congress transferred billions in general revenue to the fund.

Historically, the department has had an "engineering" attitude, concentrating on building and operating things rather than taking a proactive stance on policy, Sperling said. It

would help, he said, if LaHood simply walked across the street to the Environmental Protection Agency to make sure the two agencies work in tandem.

Can congestion pricing bolster sagging highway funds?

Pietro Nivola, an analyst at the Brookings Institution, recommended that LaHood continue Bush administration efforts to push congestion pricing, which charges motorists a premium during times of congested traffic. There have been pilot projects, and San Francisco is making plans to become the first U.S. city to try it on a wide scale ([Greenwire](#), Dec. 8).

In Nivola's view, such a plan would do more to cut greenhouse gas output than would mandated increases in fuel efficiency standards for vehicles. It also would create a new source of revenue just as the Highway Trust Fund is leaking money.

"We are lagging so far behind Europe on all of this," said Nivola. He pointed to a program in France that awards rebates to purchasers of cars that emit 30 percent less carbon dioxide than average as the kind of policy the United States should consider.

The department does have a Center for Climate Change and Environmental Forecasting whose stated purpose is formulating policy options about the link between global warming and transportation. Last year for example, the Center released a [study](#) about the Gulf Coast concluding that 2,400 miles of roadway are at risk in the region because of flooding.

It also has a climate change coordinating council within its walls with the role of harmonizing activities of internal agencies like the Federal Aviation Administration and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. How much that council will coordinate with Browner, Obama's new assistant on energy and climate, is a bigger question.

"The Transportation Department has been a bit of a backwater agency in the past," said Replogle. "The challenge for the new secretary will be to jump-start an issue that just recently got on the radar of transportation agencies."