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President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden attend the National Tree Lighting Ceremony at the

President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden attend the National Tree Lighting Ceremony at the Ellipse near the White House in Washington Dec. 2, 2021. (CNS photo/Leah Millis, Reuters)



by Brian Roewe

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Editor's Note: *EarthBeat Weekly is your weekly newsletter about faith and climate change. Below is the Dec. 17 edition. To receive EarthBeat Weekly in your inbox, sign up here.*

In "I'll Be Home for Christmas," the last line reveals that the promise in the song's title ultimately isn't to be, but rather the longing of a soldier at war who won't be returning in time to celebrate the season with family and friends.

So too it seems that way for Senate Democrats' dreams of passing the nearly $2 trillion Build Back Better Act, and its half trillion-dollar investments this decade in climate initiatives, before Christmas. Reports all week indicated that the prospects of the bill's passage ahead of Congress' holiday break were waning, as negotiations have not progressed as hoped.

On Thursday, President Joe Biden said talks between him and Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, a key linchpin for Build Back Better, will continue next week, and that he and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer "are determined to see the bill successfully on the floor as early as possible."

News reports suggest negotiations on the approximately $2 trillion social policy and climate bill, which would be spread out over 10 years, will push into early January. The Senate is now expected to turn attention to passing voting rights legislation, though that too faces an arduous path and likely a change in Senate rules regarding the filibuster.

Since it decoupled from the bipartisan infrastructure bill that Biden signed into law on Nov. 15, the Build Back Better Act has slowed in the Senate.

Within the text passed by the House of Representatives in November are an estimated $555 billion in climate provisions, including tax credits for solar installation, electric vehicle purchases, building energy efficiency upgrades and the creation of a Civilian Climate Corps. Together, those measures represent a central piece of the new national pledge Biden made under the Paris Agreement, and delivered at COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland, for the U.S. to slash its greenhouse gas emissions by 50%-52% by 2030.

The lack of any Senate Republican support for the Build Back Better Act means that all 48 Democrats and the two independents who caucus with them are needed to pass it through a budget reconciliation process with a simple majority, with Vice President Kamala Harris casting the tie-breaking vote to send it to Biden's desk. The situation has resulted in any single senator holding significant sway in the way the legislation is shaped.

No one was wielded that power more so than Manchin.

Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., makes his way through a crowd of Capitol Hill reporters outside th

Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., makes his way through a crowd of Capitol Hill reporters outside the U.S. Capitol in Washington Sept. 30, 2021. (CNS photo/Leah Millis, Reuters)

Already, the centrist Catholic Democrat from bright-red West Virginia, whose family business' millions from waste coal have come under increasing scrutiny, has played a leading role in cutting the bill nearly in half, from its original $3.5 trillion spread over 10 years, and had removed a critical stick supported by numerous religious environmental coalitions — the clean electricity payment program — to push power companies toward clean energy.

Manchin, chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, has raised concerns with a fee on methane emissions and with the additional $2,500 incentive for purchasing union-made electric vehicles, on top of a flat $7,500 credit for buying an electric vehicle and $2,500 for it being American-made. This week, the Washington Post reported that Manchin has also rejected provisions that would ban future drilling off the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, and "expressed surprise" the bill would also bar oil and gas development in the Alaskan Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

In addition, Manchin has expressed reservations about the bill's extension of the expanded child tax credit, and questioned the full cost of the legislation should all programs be extended for 10 years.

While the Build Back Better Act stalls, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has begun rolling out plans to replace all lead pipes for drinking water. Funding to the tune of $15 billion was included for the effort in the infrastructure bill, as was $1 billion for cleaning up Superfund sites nationwide.

But the bulk of the Biden agenda's environmental and climate funding lies in the Build Back Better Act.

There has been no shortage of advocacy groups and concerned citizens seeking to persuade Manchin to overcome his objections and see the bill as a critical piece in the nation's effort to combat climate change and address rising social and economic inequality. The Poor People's Campaign has conducted sit-ins in his offices. The Sunrise Movement has staked out his D.C. yacht. Interfaith leaders from his home

state have urged him to heed Pope Francis' lead in protecting creation. Nearly a dozen mothers from West Virginia spoke with his staff this week to describe how the raised child credit, coming monthly rather than annually, has changed their lives for the better.

And then there's the president, who has conducted multiple private meetings with the West Virginian. In his Dec. 16 statement, Biden expressed optimism that in the end Manchin will come aboard, saying the senator has reiterated his support for the $1.75 billion funding framework Biden outlined in September, adding "I believe that we will bridge our differences and advance the Build Back Better plan."

But as Manchin's objections seemingly increase by the week, Democrats and their allies may have to place hope in another Christmas story — involving a visit from three spirits — for the West Virginia senator to have a change of heart on Build Back Better in the new year.

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Here's what's new on EarthBeat this week:

- Major storms, strong winds and tornadoes struck the Midwest and South this week, including Mayfield, Kentucky, where one of the most powerful twisters in U.S. history leveled the town, leaving residents in mourning and prayer, as well as with resolve to rebuild shattered lives and their community, reports Catholic News Service.

- During this holiday season filled with gift-giving expectations, Céire Kealty, a doctoral student at Villanova University, writes about her experiences with the Buy Nothing Project, where neighbors reduce environmental impact through giving without charge.

- Several Catholic Church organizations have spoken out against illegal mining after gold was discovered in Brazil's Madeira River in November, saying the illicit practices not only harm critical ecosystems but pose health threats and cause divisions among Indigenous communities.

- Count Catholic sisters among those rejoicing in the success of an historic yearlong protest by India's farmers against federal reforms that deregulated crop prices and opened fields to corporate interests. Thomas Scaria has the story for Global Sisters Report.

- In the penultimate week of the "Simple Advent Revisited" series, Brenna Davis explores questions about consumption, including reflecting on all our stuff and suggesting a Christmas break from technology.

Here's some of what's new in other climate news:

- A new report from the World Inequality Lab found that the richest 10% of the world's population is responsible for nearly half of global greenhouse gas emissions, and disparities exist within countries, too, writes María Paula Rubiano A. for Grist. And Mark Amao of Grist also reports that while U.S. air quality has improved, people of color, regardless of income, are more likely to breath polluted air.

- While COP 26 sought to consign coal to history, electricity from the fossil fuel grew 9% this year and is poised to hit an all-time high in 2022, Jillian Ambrose reports for The Guardian.

- As strong storms struck the U.S., Super Typhoon Rai (also called Odette) made landfall in the Philippines Dec. 16 with 120 mph winds, leveling homes and displacing hundreds of thousands of people, per the BBC.

- A major multimedia project from The New York Times leads a tour through postcards from 193 countries of how climate change is impacting our world right now. It is eye-opening.

- And in some more positive news, a group of European supermarkets have agreed to stop selling imported Brazilian beef linked to deforestation in the Amazon, writes Ashoka Mukpo for Mongabay.

Final Beat:

With next Friday being Christmas Eve, the NCR offices will be closed and we'll also take a one-week hiatus here from EarthBeat Weekly. But rest assured, we'll be back the following week, on New Year's Eve, with a rundown of some of the top stories and news moments from 2021 at EarthBeat.

As always, please forward this email, or pass along the link to EarthBeat Weekly on our website, to a friend who might appreciate EarthBeat.

And of course, thanks to you for reading, and an early Merry Christmas.

This story appears in the **EarthBeat Weekly** feature series. View the full series.