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A view of the U.S. Capitol building in Washington. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



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Just when it appeared the prospects for Congress to pass climate legislation had all but collapsed, Democrats in the Senate struck a major deal by securing an elusive vote to resuscitate hundreds of billions of dollars in energy and climate investments as part of an expansive inflation, tax and health care reform bill.

Faith groups responded to the historic, and for many unexpected, milestone of a potential breakthrough on climate legislation — the largest investment ever by the country in addressing climate change and first significant legislative package on climate change in three decades — with a mixture of joy, shock and cautious optimism after years of prayer and advocacy.

"We're delighted and heartened by this surprise movement," said Jose Aguto, executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant. He called the bill "a huge win" that represents the significant congressional action on climate that environmental groups have sought for years.

"We're thrilled at this turnabout, but also want to make sure that it gets across the finish line," he told EarthBeat.

The $433 billion bill has a new name, the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, after shedding its one-time Build Back Better moniker. The vast majority of the budget reconciliation package's investments come through $369 billion over 10 years in spending on energy and climate change, which a summary document estimates will reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by roughly 40% by the end of the decade.

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That would meet 80% of the U.S. goal under the Paris Agreement to slash emissions at least in half compared to 2005 levels by 2030 — the year by which climate scientists have said global emissions need to be cut at least 45% to put the planet on track to limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Recent analyses, before

the Senate's deal, had shown the U.S. falling well short of its self-determined target without substantial new policies.

Creation Justice Ministries, a Washington D.C.-based Christian environmental justice coalition, said that "This bill is necessary for the health and longevity of God's people and God's planet."

"I don't know that any of us expected this," said Charity Sr. Louise Lears, the lead on creation care advocacy for Franciscan Action Network.

"We are glad to see this bill, and hopefully it'll be passed into legislation so that we're not just acting by one executive order after another," she said.



Sen. Joe Manchin, D-West Virginia, speaks during a Senate Appropriations Committee hearing on Capitol Hill April 20 in Washington. (CNS/Reuters/Oliver Contreras)

A 'curveball' from Manchin

The bill surprised both lawmakers and climate activists alike, with news of the breakthrough first announced Wednesday evening (July 27) by Sen. Joe Manchin, the West Virginia centrist Democrat whose critical vote had eluded his party's leadership for more than a year in their efforts to pass a multi-trillion-dollar social and climate spending bill as part of President Joe Biden's "Build Back Better" domestic agenda.

"I support a plan that will advance a realistic energy and climate policy that lowers prices today and strategically invests in the long game," Manchin said in a statement saying he would propose and vote for the bill. He added that "it is vital we not undermine our super power status by removing dependable and affordable fossil fuel energy before new technologies are ready to reliably carry the load."

Just weeks earlier, Manchin, a Catholic with family ties to the coal industry, stated he no longer supported climate provisions in a reconciliation bill over concerns with inflation, but that he could reconsider once inflation showed signs of cooling. That a deal was now struck came as a shock to many, including faith groups who for months lobbied for the bill and sought to sway Manchin.

Related: West Virginia faith leaders deliver Christmas card to bring Manchin back to Build Back Better bill

Rich Stonestreet, co-coordinator of the West Virginia-based Catholics for a Sustainable Economy, applauded his senator and Sen. Majority Leader Chuck Schumer "for getting the job done."

"Although not perfect, this legislation is a significant step toward addressing the climate crisis and doing it in a fiscally responsible way," he told EarthBeat in an email.

The Rev. Robin Blakeman, a steering committee member of West Virginia Interfaith Power & Light, said she was "glad that Senator Manchin is engaging in serious discussion about the critical needs of our nation."

Added Lears, "He certainly threw a curveball on this one."



President Joe Biden delivers remarks on climate change and renewable energy at the site of the former Brayton Point Power Station July 20 in Somerset, Massachusetts. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

The proposed legislation still has several critical steps to cross before arriving at the president's desk.

It first must pass through the Senate parliamentarian as part of the budget reconciliation process that Democrats have used to pass the bill with a simple majority and bypass a filibuster by Republicans, none of whom have lent support to any of the bill's iterations. Schumer indicated he will bring the bill to the Senate floor next week. Should it pass there, it will head back to the House of Representatives for a vote. Modifications or amendments could be proposed along the way.

Biden, who last week (July 20) issued executive actions on climate change and floated the possibility of declaring it a federal emergency, lent presidential support to the deal, saying it "will improve our energy security and tackle the climate crisis"

while lowering costs and creating jobs. He encouraged both chambers of Congress to move quickly on the bill.

"This is the action the American people have been waiting for. This addresses the problems of today — high health care costs and overall inflation — as well as investments in our energy security for the future," he said.



Susana Segura, with Bread and Blankets Mutual Aid, left, gives out water, bananas and hats to unhoused people and others in need during a heat advisory July 21 in San Antonio. (CNS/Reuters/Lisa Krantz)

Investments in clean energy, environmental justice

The new bill, while less than the $555 billion in climate and energy investments passed by the House in November, contains many pieces of the old bill.

It includes more than $60 billion in clean energy and transportation technologies, including $30 billion in tax credits for solar panels, wind turbines, batteries and

processing of critical minerals. It also has tax credits for people to install clean energy and efficiency upgrades at home, including solar panels and heat pumps, and income-limited tax credits to purchase electric vehicles.

In addition, the bill allocates another $60 billion in environmental justice initiatives to drive investments in disadvantaged communities, $20 billion in "climate-smart" agriculture practices, establishes a federal green bank, and places a fee on methane emissions.

The deal also requires new oil and gas lease sales in the Gulf of Mexico and off Alaska's coast. With that, Manchin, Schumer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi also struck a deal with address reforms to the energy and infrastructure permitting process in a separate bill later this year.

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Sen. Ed Markey of Massachusetts, a Catholic and Boston College graduate, hailed the bill as "the most significant investment in environmental justice and climate action in American history." A close ally of the youth-led Sunrise Movement, Markey told young climate activists that while the climate package "may not be everything that we want … it's the start that we need."

Beyond climate measures, the bill extends the Affordable Care Act premium tax credits for three years and authorizes Medicare to negotiate prescription drug prices. Senate Democrats say the bill will be paid for through establishing a 15% corporate minimum tax, strengthened IRS enforcement measures and closing tax loopholes. They project it will result in $300 billion in deficit reduction that will help in lowering inflation.

At two events on Capitol Hill on July 27, the Catholic social justice lobby Network joined other faith-based organizations in calling on Congress to pass the reconciliation bill before the August recess.

Mary Novak, Network executive director, said she was "relieved" to hear a deal was struck.



Mary Novak, executive director of Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, speaks July 27 during a faith leader rally on Capitol Hill urging lawmakers to pass an equitable and just budget reconciliation package. (Courtesy of Network)

"Passing the tax reform, ACA premium tax credits, drug pricing, and climate provisions in the Inflation Reduction Act would be a significant step toward a better, more just future," she said in a statement.

But she added that leaving out Medicaid expansion for the 2.2 million people in the coverage gap "is a deeply disappointing moral failure" and urged Manchin and the Senate to put that back in the legislation.

Franciscan Action Network and the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas were each encouraged by the bill's major investments in clean energy and environmental justice.

"We are particularly heartened to see measures to decarbonize the economy, reduce methane leaks from natural gas production, and redress disproportionate

harms from pollution and climate change in Black, brown and low-income communities," said Marianne Comfort, justice coordinator for the Mercy sisters.

Related: Ahead of midterm elections, interfaith 'revival' links voting rights, climate

Still, she said the sisters were concerned by the commitment to potentially fast-track permits for fossil fuel projects, which she said have in the past had devastating impacts on ecosystems and marginalized communities, especially Native peoples. Franciscan Action Network also expressed disappointment with the bill's oil and gas lease requirements, which it said it will seek to reduce.

Karyn Bigelow, co-executive director of Creation Justice Ministries, in a statement called the bill "a big win" for climate advocates across the U.S. "who have worked many years for this moment."

"I hope this historic legislation sets a pattern for Congress to prioritize climate justice for all of God's creation," she said.



Dry land surrounds Great Salt Lake's Antelope Island July 13 in Salt Lake City, Utah. (CNS/Reuters/Brian Snyder)

The Rev. Susan Hendershot, president of Interfaith Power & Light, said they were still reviewing details of the deal but what was already clear was the "enormous toll" climate change has already taken on human life and the moral obligation to respond. "We need Congress and President Biden to act with the urgency that is needed to take immediate, bold, and equitable climate actions," she said in a statement.

Polling this spring by researchers at Yale University and George Mason University found more than half (57%) of U.S. registered voters believe Congress should do more to address global warming. Just 14% of registered voters believe the federal government as a whole is responding well to global warming.

The survey also found overwhelming support for many of the climate policies Congress has been considering, including tax incentives for energy efficiency in buildings (87%), tax rebates for electric vehicles and solar panels (77%), increasing funding to assist marginalized communities at greater risk of air and water pollution (69%) and establishing a Civilian Climate Corps (86%). In addition, 8-in-10 voters support generating renewable energy on public land, and 63% back requiring electric utilities to produce 100% of electricity from renewable sources by 2035.



Windmill turbines are seen offshore near Amsterdam, Netherlands, in 2017. (CNS/Reuters/Yves Herman)

Faith push for climate action

For more than a year, Catholic and other faith-based groups have rallied support behind a bill that would see the world's historically leading source of greenhouse gas emissions significantly address climate change.

That work continued in the days before the Senate deal was struck.

The Catholic Climate Covenant on July 25 began circulating a sign-on letter among church leaders calling on all members of Congress to support emissions-reducing legislation. The letter said that the damaging impacts of climate change are being felt in the U.S. and across the world right now, including dangerous heat waves and extreme storms, and will only become more severe without "dramatic reductions in greenhouse gas emissions."

Citing Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," the letter told legislators that true statecraft upholds "high principles" and promotes the long-term common good, and asks them to consider the type of world they are leaving to their children, grandchildren and future generations.

Related: US Catholic bishops press Congress to pass $555 billion climate legislation

"The U.S. Congress can still pivot our nation and world away from this precipice with ambitious climate solutions. … We hope and pray you will hear our plea to enact meaningful solutions to the climate crisis, for the good of our common home and common future," the letter read.

The letter followed a campaign the Covenant launched in May that mobilized more than 800 Catholics in nearly every state to press their senators, Democrat or Republican, to support the $555 billion climate package in the reconciliation bill. The effort was backed by other national Catholic organizations, like Catholic Health Association, the National Catholic Educational Association and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. In addition, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote multiple letters to Congress urging the bill's passage.

"All senators, all legislators have a responsibility," Aguto said late last week.

At the time, he acknowledged chances of a robust climate package passing Congress were "very slim … but we're persevering in faith."

"We continue to persist until it's over," he told EarthBeat then. "It's not over until it's over."

Related: Faith groups press Congress to pass $3.5T bill as political, moral imperative for climate action