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## **On Climate, Energy, Oil Rigs: First, Do No Harm**

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United States action on global warming is long overdue. But energy industry lobbyists and their Senate allies have thwarted the best efforts of three leading senators. The result: A weak bill with egregious flaws. Fortunately, it is [temporarily derailed](#). This hiatus provides President Obama and the three senators time to fix it.

They should keep in mind the Hippocratic Oath: First, Do no harm. Unfortunately, the bill would do harm.

The bill, as currently drafted, would prevent full use of the Clean Air Act and restrict the states from acting on their own against global warming. These are the two mechanisms that have yielded the only significant progress our nation has made against climate change.

The president has the power to act and has demonstrated his willingness to use it. On April 1, the Obama administration, acting under the Clean Air Act, [toughened the emissions and fuel economy standards](#) governing cars and light trucks sold in the United States. This was the single biggest step the United States has taken to cut global warming pollution.

And, as Emily Figdor, director of Environment America's federal [global warming program](#), wrote to senators, "The new federal clean car standards--which will save more than 11 billion gallons of gasoline per year by 2016--would have never come to be if states hadn't been allowed to enact stronger policies than the federal government."

Yet in response to the demands of industry lobbyists, the legislation proposed by Sens. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.), Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) and Joseph I. Lieberman (I-Conn.) restricts the states' ability to set their own standards and weakens the Clean Air Act itself. The extent of these limits remains secret.

Figdor continued, "Stripping states of their ability to continue to lead would both ignore the great strides that states have made thus far and jeopardize the country's ability to build a clean energy economy and stop the worst effects of global warming."

To win support from oil state senators and the oil industry, the bill expands drilling for offshore oil. Just days ago, a [BP drilling rig exploded](#), killing 11 workers and threatening the Gulf of Mexico from Texas to Florida. The sight of [burning oil](#) in the gulf is disturbingly reminiscent of Cleveland's polluted [Cuyahoga River aflame](#) in 1969, an image that helped spawn the first Earth Day 40 years ago. Particularly in light of this unfolding disaster, [expanded offshore drilling is unacceptable](#).

[Two coal mine disasters](#) within a month remind us that coal is [deadly](#) as well as filthy. The bill's cap and trade system for utilities won't cut our reliance on coal. Miners will still [risk their lives](#) for decades to come because the coal industry gets a new lease on life and billions in subsidies for "[clean coal](#)."

The term is an oxymoron. Industry lobbyists say "[clean coal](#)" is just around the corner--just give us another few years and a few billion more dollars in subsidies. They must like the phrase: They've been using it for 25 years and they'll be using it for another 25 years.

The bill awards the nuclear industry billions in federal subsidies to build 12 power plants. Why such a chunk of money from the taxpayers? Because even Wall Street won't invest in the most expensive way ever devised to boil water, which is how power plants turn their turbines to generate electricity.

Then there's the curious system of "[offsets](#)," which industries have demanded to avoid reducing emissions. So, for example, an oil or electric utility company in New Jersey could exceed carbon emissions limits by paying to plant carbon-absorbing saplings in, say, Guatemala. But it is hard to police such deals to guarantee that the trees actually grow up and absorb as much carbon as envisioned, and aren't felled by a hurricane or cut down to make room for a resort.

Certainly, the bill is not all bad. It includes good energy efficiency standards. To promote wind and solar power, it includes a renewable energy standard--but the standard is weak. The measure aims to cut carbon emissions 17% by 2020, from 2005 levels. But with all the bill's loopholes--weakening the Clean Air Act, handcuffing the states, offsets--it is unlikely to achieve that goal.

These are small steps forward, more than offset by the many backward ones the bill takes.

The president should work with Kerry, Graham and Lieberman to remove these problems, beginning with the restrictions on the Clean Air Act and the states' power to act on their own. They should drop the loopholes supporting the oil, coal and nuclear industries.

Yes, we need action. But what we really need is the right action.

Hippocrates had it right.

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