

Catholic coalition seeks to influence outcome of climate-change bill

WASHINGTON - Led by a coalition of more than a dozen Catholic organizations, religious communities are ramping up efforts to ensure that the legislative debate on climate change beginning April 22 in Congress will not overlook the world's poorest and most vulnerable people.

The effort of the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change and the National Religious Partnership on the Environment came as the House Energy and Commerce Committee opened hearings on a clean energy bill.

The Catholic coalition unveiled the Catholic Climate Covenant, a wide-ranging climate-change campaign, during a nationwide teleconference April 21.

Aimed largely at Catholics in the country's 19,000 parishes and 6,250 elementary schools, the campaign integrates the traditional Catholic practice of prayer with specific actions meant to reduce an individual's carbon footprint on the world while influencing public policy.

Several coalition leaders said specific steps involve lobbying Congress and state legislatures about the need to pass prudent legislation that takes into account the needs of the common good, specifically the poor whom they say are affected most by climate change.

While noting that the effort revolves around prayer and reflection, John Carr, executive director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development and coalition chairman, acknowledged that working within the political arena will be a necessary part of the campaign's work.

"For us, the moral message on climate-change legislation is how it treats the least of these," he explained. "We're making that case on Capitol Hill and now we're making that case across the country."

“There is going to be a huge debate, in fact a struggle ... and our voice is going to be that voice that puts the poor first.”

Mr. Carr said coalition representatives have met with Rep. Henry Waxman, the California Democrat chairing the hearings in the House, and “found a very receptive audience” to the concerns they raised.

Kathy Brown, senior director for mission at Catholic Charities USA, said during the teleconference that the agency has convened its diocesan Catholic Charities agencies in California to begin discussions on the need for legislative action in the one of the nation’s largest greenhouse gas states. The plan is to build a broad coalition to influence environmental policy, she said.

Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., honorary chairman of the campaign, said the campaign is “an urgent call with an urgent message.”

“The effort is important because it brings Catholics together around who we are, what we already do, what we believe and how we can impact the consequences of climate change,” he said.

The campaign is being introduced at a time when a majority of Catholics believe that climate change is a serious problem, according to pollster John Zogby.

Speaking from Prague, Czech Republic, during the teleconference, Mr. Zogby said 55 percent of the 1,001 Catholics polled between March 30 and April 14 believed global warming and climate change were serious problems. The poll found that 60 percent of respondents felt that climate change must be addressed immediately even if not everything is known about it.

The margin of error for the poll was plus or minus 3.2 percent.

The campaign was introduced as the nation prepared to observe Earth Day to motivate Catholics to make necessary changes in their lives to reduce their carbon footprint on the planet, said Daniel Misleh, executive director of the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change.

As part of the rollout, the campaign placed ads in the April 21 editions of 10

metropolitan daily newspapers, including The New York Times, the Houston Chronicle, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and the San Antonio Express-News.

Some of the ads were aimed at specific congressional districts whose representatives hold key votes in Congress, Mr. Misleh said.

The ads depict a footprint and the image of a poor mother and her child with the message “Who’s under your carbon footprint?”

Ads also will appear in Catholic publications nationwide during the next several weeks, Mr. Misleh added.

The \$100,000 ad effort was funded through the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, to which the USCCB belongs. Other members include the National Council of Churches of Christ, the Coalition on Environment and Jewish Life, and the Evangelical Environment Network.

The covenant focuses on urging individuals to sign on to the St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor. The pledge is billed as “a promise and a commitment” to honor God’s creation and stand with poor people through prayers, education, the assessment of individual lives, action to change choices and behaviors, and advocacy for Catholic principles in climate-change discussions.

President Barack Obama has challenged Congress to pass clean-energy legislation by the end of the year to show the world that the United States is leading the way to combat climate change.

The draft bill before Rep. Waxman’s committee would cut emissions by 20 percent from 2005 levels by 2020 and boost reliance on renewable energy sources.

More information about the Catholic Climate Covenant is available online at www.CatholicClimateCovenant.org.