

Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org

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Dan McCue

Renewable Energy Magazine spoke to Bill McKibben, founder of the carbon emissions reduction advocacy group, 350.org, in January, just days after the new Congress was seated and Republican Congressman John Boehner was sworn in as the new Speaker of the US House of Representatives.

The seating of the Republican-controlled 112th Congress in the US in January was expected to change a great many things in Washington, D.C. Among these being how ambitious the government is likely to be going forward in regard to such issues as the promotion of renewable energy – one reason, the outgoing, Democratically-controlled Congress rushed to extend incentives for renewables during its swan song session in December – and how likely the US will be to take definitive steps to curb carbon dioxide emissions or even participate in the United Nations Climate Change Conference, the next session of which is scheduled to take place in South Africa, 28 November to 9 December 2011.

A little over a month later, President Obama and Congress are already poised for what promises to be a high-stakes budget battle with many administration proposals on renewable energy initiatives hanging in the balance.

*During the interview that follows, Bill McKibben, who has been described as “probably the nation’s leading environmentalist” by *The Boston Globe* newspaper in the US and as “one of the 100 most important global thinkers” by *Foreign Policy* magazine, described the new era in Washington as “grim”.*

*Bill McKibben is founder of 350.org and author of several books on global warming and energy policy including *The End of Nature*, widely regarded as the first book for a general audience about climate change, *Deep Economy: the Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*, and *earth: Making A Life On A Tough New Planet*.*

On 10 October 2010, McKibben and his 350.org coordinated what is believed to have been the largest ever global coordinated rally related to climate change, with about 7,400 participants in 188 countries.

*In this interview, *Renewable Energy Magazine*’s US correspondent, Dan McCue, finds out why McKibben is pessimistic about the world’s efforts to combat climate change.*

Interview date: January 2011

Interviewer: Dan McCue

I suppose the best way to get a sense of where we are headed in terms of US policy is to discuss where we are, not only in the wake of the swearing in of the new Congress here, but also of the latest UN climate change talks in Cancun. Therefore, an admittedly broad question: Where do we stand, today, in terms of addressing climate change?

Well, we are not getting very far. Clearly, the science indicates we need a dramatic and quick reduction in the use of fossil fuels. I believe, very dramatic and very quick. Jim Hansen at NASA, probably the world's best climatologist, has said pretty much that we've got to be out of the business of burning coal in a couple of decades at the most.

And if we tried to do it, it would be the biggest task that humans have ever undertaken -- both economically and politically, and from an engineering perspective. So far, despite advances in the renewable energy sector, we are putting off getting started.

The US Senate couldn't even bring itself to vote on a climate change bill last year, and that pretty much sunk the UN meetings at Copenhagen and now Cancun, so we're not getting very far. And it appears that the situation is even more grim now that Congress has changed hands.

Personally, I think the next couple of years will be bleak in Washington, DC, but lots of things can happen in the meantime, lots of things on the state and local level. At the same time, we've got to really build a big political movement in this country and around the world to force action as soon as there's an opening. So that's what we try to do at 350.org. We've had some success building a giant grassroots movement in the past year or two.

So how does one build a movement?

Well, in our case, we've done it by finding people of all kinds, all around the world. Our last big event was in October. We had what we called a global work party. We asked people to come together in their communities and do something useful, whether that be putting up solar panels, digging community gardens, laying out bike paths... and we were able to convene, on the same day, about 7,400 of these in 188 countries. Pretty much every place but North Korea, and people were doing that work and they were also being politically engaged. They were calling up their leaders and saying, "We're getting to work, what about you?"

And so it's a sign that it is at least possible to do work on this scale, but we've got to go it quickly.

When you use the words like "quickly" and "dramatically," what does that really mean in climate terms?

Well, we're already behind the 8-ball. The planet has already warmed about a degree. That's apparently enough to melt the arctic, and kick off a lot of other big changes. I described a lot of the big changes that are under way in my most recent book, *eaarth*, with two "a's" in the theory that it is already a kind of new planet.

We're not going back on that. That's not going to go away, unfortunately. So, now we're talking about trying to limit that damage as much as we can. I don't think there's anyone that thinks we're going to stop short of a degree and a half or so of temperature increase.

So, now, you've got this grassroots movement going, and, in the near term, Washington isn't where meaningful climate change policy is going to be happening. What can be done on the state and local and international level?

Well, it depends and is different from place to place. Everybody has got to take advantage of what they've got close to home. So, for instance, up and down the East Coast of the United States, there seems to be significant potential for the development of wind energy. Out west, they're working a lot on solar.

Here in Vermont [where McKibben lives and serves as scholar in residence at Middlebury College], we're working on all of these things and doing a lot of conservation work, which is really important too. But, you don't want to overstate what can happen on the local level. At a certain point we need the intervention of the federal government to reset the price of fossil fuel, to make carbon pay the price of the damage it does in the atmosphere. When that happens, that will probably be the day when we start to make speedier progress.

When you say, "reset the price of fossil fuel," what's the thinking behind that? What are we talking about?

It's that Exxon is not asked to pay any of the cost of the damage that they create. Look, their business model is we get to use the atmosphere as an open sewer into which we dump our main waste product -- carbon dioxide -- for free. Unlike most commodities, they are not asked to pay the price for the damage their product does. Hence we use way more of it than we would, with no real accounting of the costs.

How do you feel about renewable energy as a growth industry?

The renewable energy sector is clearly growing; the question is, can it grow fast enough to really put a dent in carbon emissions? We don't know the answer yet. What's clear is it takes vigorous government action to help it grow really speedily. So Feed-In Tariffs, changes in the price of carbon, all the sort of things that have worked across Europe are really important.

Is your perception that Europe is way ahead of the US in this regard?

I think that's accurate. The Scandinavians were in the lead, initially. The Germans have done a lot with solar, the Spaniards are doing lots with wind and solar.

Do you have a sector, a form of renewable energy, that you're more of a proponent of another?

No. What I think is important to understand is that there's no silver bullet, nothing that replaces fossil fuel one-for-one.

Fossil fuel is really good stuff. It's cheap, dense, energy rich, easy to transport; it's pretty much magic fuel -- except that it wrecks the planet.

Of the things that are coming after: Solar, wind, geothermal, what have you, none of them are perfect and what we need, depending on where you are, is a big mix of different things.

I think that "depending on where you are" is very important. Fossil Fuel tended to flatten out the world. It worked the same everywhere. It was easy to transport. When it comes to renewable energy, there are parts of the world that have wind and parts that have sun and parts that have tide; parts that have geothermal power, and parts that have some mix of all of them and everybody's got to get to work.

Now, going from macro to more local level, in the course of my reporting I've found that the cost of implementing solar or geothermal on, say, a home, is still prohibitive high in many places How do we get to where that's an affordable option?

We've got to do enough of it that we drive the price down. There's no question. I mean, it's already happening. There are parts of the world where wind and solar is now cheaper than many of their competitors. That's partly because they've done so much of them. In China, we think that there are something like 60 million solar hot water systems already installed and working, and maybe 250 million Chinese taking a shower every day with hot water that comes from the roof; it's become the de facto standard and it's cheaper than the alternatives at this point.

What's next in terms of your organizing efforts?

Well, in this country, we're going to try hard to point out and illustrate the ways that dirty money has polluted this debate, and prevented real action, and around the world we'll continue big mobilizations. For instance, we'll be doing a lot with bicycles this year. Our basic work is to keep spreading the scientific understanding of what's going on. We take our name from what the scientists have told us is the most carbon that can safely be in the atmosphere, 350 parts per million, a level that we've unfortunately greatly exceeded.

So we need to somehow convince our political class that though it is difficult to change political reality, it's easier than changing the laws of physics.

But, you know, the skeptics seem to have the podium at the moment, at least in terms of talk radio in the US and the like...

That's true. We're out-moneyed. There's no question. But I'm afraid the unfortunate advantage that we may possess is that the planet is going to keep reminding people of what's going on. It's going to keep hitting us upside the head until we pay attention.

OK, now finally, suppose you're surprised and things turn out not to be as grim as you anticipate. What's on your wish list in terms of federal policy to foster renewable energy?

I'd like to see what Jim Hansen has called a "fee and dividend plan" that puts a hefty fee on fossil fuel importers and producers, thereby driving up the price of coal and gas and oil, and takes that money and rebates it to Americans every month. That way, the consumer is made whole in the face of those increases in the cost of energy, but gets a strong and constant price signal to move quickly in a new direction.

For additional information:

350.org