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Manchin touts "all-of-the above" energy policy as he heads first climate hearing of new Congress

By Mike Tony Staff writer

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Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va.

AP file photo

Joe Manchin's positions, from his support for preserving the filibuster to his opposition to raising the minimum hourly wage to \$15, have been under scrutiny like never before, given the centrist Democrat's bolstered clout in an evenly divided U.S. Senate.

Presiding over a hearing Wednesday on global climate trends as incoming chairman of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, West Virginia's senior senator urged sticking with the facts, the most important being that climate change is a "critical" issue every country must face.

"No doubt, we will all have differing views on the best way to do that," Manchin said. "But first, I believe we must begin with a common understanding of where we stand today and what got us here."

The committee heard from a panel of five energy and climate expert witnesses who agreed that it would be a steep challenge reducing greenhouse gas emissions enough to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by 2050, in accordance with the international Paris Agreement. The United States rejoined that pact after President Joe Biden took office on Jan. 20.

"[T]oday's policies are enough only to secure a flattening of global emissions out to 2040, a trajectory far from what will be needed to avoid severe impacts from climate change," International Energy Agency Executive Director Fatih Birol said.

A former coal brokerage founder, Manchin repeated his support for an "all-of-the-above energy policy" and a wide array of emissions-reducing technologies. He said "fossil fuels aren't going anywhere anytime soon," but he touted the importance of giving new opportunities to communities

affected by a clean-energy transition.

Failing to heed the Paris Agreement's warning on limiting the increase in global temperatures will result in sea level rise, extreme heat, loss of ecosystems and species and reductions of crop and fishery yield, said University of North Carolina assistant professor Angel Hsu.

"The urgency for humanity to get to zero emissions by mid-century remains, if we are to stave off climate change's most pernicious effects, and even then the impacts will be felt all across the world," Hsu said.

Manchin questioned whether China's progress toward meeting climate target compliance can be verified. Hsu cited satellite remote-sensing data.

"We can see, we can observe from space and use that data to see that China actually has been really effective in reducing primarily air pollution," Hsu said.

Manchin voiced frustration with the Paris Agreement for not having enforcement mechanisms or applying penalties for failure to reduce emissions.

"There's nothing enforcing about the Paris accord," Manchin said. "That's the problem. Nothing enforcing whatsoever."

Technological innovation will be critical in the fight against climate change, Birol said, calling carbon capture utilization and storage a "key opportunity" and applauding committee members, including Manchin, for supporting a tax credit that Congress expanded in 2018 to spur investment in the technology.

Scott Tinker, director of the Bureau of Economic Geology at the University of Texas, predicted that solar and wind technologies would require panels, turbines and batteries consisting of "a tremendous amount of nonrenewable stuff" that would trigger an unprecedented scale of global mining and manufacturing and, later, landfill disposal when panels, turbines and batteries wear out.

"Robbing from nature Peter to pay climate Paul," Tinker said.

The committee voted to advance to the full Senate Biden's nomination of former Michigan governor Jennifer Granholm as energy secretary. The vote was 13-4. Manchin voted to advance the nomination. Incoming ranking member Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., voted to block it, citing Biden's executive orders to rejoin the Paris Agreement, revoke a permit for the Keystone XL pipeline and pause new oil and gas leasing on federal land and water.

West Virginia's Republican senator, Shelley Moore Capito, questioned Biden's nominee to run the Environmental Protection Agency, North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality Secretary Michael Regan.

In a confirmation hearing Wednesday, the top Republican on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee criticized the Obama administration for its environmental protection policy and got a commitment from Regan to visit states like West Virginia that are directly affected by environmental policies.