

Denton Publications
November 2, 2009

Gillibrand pledges fight to curb acid rain, air pollution

By Jonathan Alexander, Staff Writer, Adirondack Journal

BLUE MOUNTAIN LAKE — During a five-county tour Friday of the North Country, U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) talked with local community leaders, focusing primarily on rural economic development initiatives.

But when she convened later in the day with representatives of several environmental groups in the Adirondack Museum, she said she'd be working hard to cut down on air pollution, acid rain and other threats to the Adirondack environment.

Speaking about pending environmental legislation, Gillibrand said that her posts on various U.S. Senate committees gives her considerable influence over the legislation's final form.

This was apparently good news to the leaders of the Adirondack Council, Nature Conservancy and Adirondack Mountain Club who had gathered to share their views.

Gillibrand is a member of the Senate's committees dealing with the environment, public works, foreign relations, agriculture, nutrition and forestry.

"Now is the time to debate climate change, because there are six committees in the Senate that have jurisdiction over drawing up this bill, and I'm on three of them," she said. "Those committees will have a big impact on what this bill will ultimately look like."

For the first time, the Senate Clean Air Planning Act — authored by Delaware Democrat and chairman of the Clean Air and Nuclear Safety Subcommittee Tom Carp — would combine provisions to stem greenhouse gas emissions with mercury and acid rain reduction measures.

Gillibrand said that she supports the Carp bill, which would require 20 percent reductions in nitrogen and sulfur oxide over the next five years and would aim for 80 percent reductions by 2050.

The bill would also require significant reductions in ozone and mercury emissions over the same time period.

Gillibrand was critical of the House membership for lacking the Senate's ambition on pollution control measures.

"One of the biggest problems with the House bill was that it created an exception with the Clean Air Act for coal," Gillibrand said. "It was giving exception to the dirtiest coal plants in the country to continue to pollute without any Clean Air Act oversight."

According to the state-funded Adirondack Lakes Survey Corp., roughly 60 percent of Adirondack lakes are experiencing declining water quality — choking life and slowly poisoning local human populations.

The environmental and scientific communities attribute the rapid decline in regional water quality to pollutants spewed from about 80 coal-powered electricity plants in the Tennessee and Ohio valleys.

According to Adirondack Mountain Club executive director Neil Woodworth, in-park mercury levels are six times the level measured 100 years ago. He also noted empirical evidence of increased mercury levels in the bodies of area woman of child-birthing age.

Woodworth and Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian Houseal and Nature Conservancy Director of Federal Programs David Higby lauded Gillibrand for supporting and influencing the Carp bill. They also called for increased U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Regulation on coal burning plants to require the use of pollutant reducing scrubbers.

Houseal said the Council supports the Carp legislation.

"I know the senator has heard from hundreds of northern and upstate New York constituents about the need to include acid rain in the climate-change bill," he said. "And we're hoping that she will back the language that Senator Carp from Delaware has included."

Woodworth said he's seeking even more immediate and drastic regulation.

"We could remove 90 percent of mercury," he said. "That should be the standard. The technology is here, and given the tax incentives that the senator has suggested, we could accomplish that by 2015."

But for Gillibrand, the passage of a practical bill that can gain support with Democrats from states with coal-fired plants and coal mines is more important than taking a philosophical stand with stronger legislation that would likely fail in committee.

"We don't want a watered-down acid rain provision, and Chairwoman Boxer has said she's only going to allow amendments that have 100 percent Democratic support," Gillibrand said.

Considering that many Midwesterners would not support such a tough measure, Gillibrand suggested routing the more stringent provisions through a legislative conference or including them in a stand-alone bill.

Gillibrand said the creation of incentives for the installation of the costly scrubber system with tax breaks may be the compromise that the coal industry and their Senators are looking for.

Discussions regarding the Carp legislation began last week and are expected to continue throughout the current legislative session.