

Wyden, Murkowski forge personal alliance to move legislation

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The Democratic chairman and top Republican on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee are sharing cabs, speaking together publicly and meeting weekly for breakfast to forge a friendship and advance energy policy.

"Spending a lot of time together with your colleagues to work through difficult issues is what this Congress needs to do more of," ranking member Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) said yesterday at an energy event in Washington, D.C. "It's when we make that separation and say, 'I've got my ideas and you've got your ideas,' and just go off and do it on your own, I don't think it's going to build the kind of policy that's important for this country."

Murkowski and Chairman Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) spoke on a panel at a Center for Strategic and International Studies event yesterday, noting their agreement on prickly issues such as whether U.S. companies should be allowed to export natural gas.

The senators are also collaborating on a path forward for nuclear waste storage -- an issue that has been tied up in Congress for years -- and have said they hope to mark up dozens of public lands bills that were approved by the panel in the 112th Congress but derailed by election-year politics (E&E Daily <<http://www.eenews.net/EEDaily/2013/02/13/archive/5>>, Feb. 13).

The pair also is working on language to bolster small hydroelectric projects (E&ENews PM <<http://www.eenews.net/eenewspm/2013/02/13/archive/8>>, Feb. 13).

Murkowski said she and Wyden want to move energy legislation instead of simply "messaging," a trend that's taken over Congress in recent years. "Messaging doesn't yield governance, it just kind of sends signals that I think are more confusing than anything else right now," she said. "We really want to advance some initiatives."

The senators' partnership could help the committee overcome political

differences that stymied legislation in the past Congress.

One case in point is nuclear waste legislation. Former Chairman Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) introduced legislation last year to revamp the country's stalled nuclear waste program but without the support of his colleagues, including Murkowski. The main sticking point: Bingaman wanted to include language to ensure temporary storage sites don't become "de facto" permanent repositories (E&ENews PM<<http://www.eenews.net/eenewspm/2012/08/01/archive/6>>, Aug. 1, 2012).

Wyden and Murkowski said they're also finding areas of agreement over the issue of LNG exports. Wyden said he was struck by the amount of "common ground" among industry groups, companies and environmental groups at the committee's hearing yesterday on LNG exports, which also touched on hydraulic fracturing.

"I don't want you to think we're just running a bouquet-tossing contest here," Wyden said. "Senator Murkowski and I are serious about this being a unique time, particularly on natural gas, there's an opportunity to build a tremendous American success story."

The newly forged partnership was also apparent at yesterday's hearing when reporters began asking questions of the two senators, who were sitting next to each other, their microphones intertwined.

"We're just so close we don't know which microphone belongs to who," Murkowski joked.