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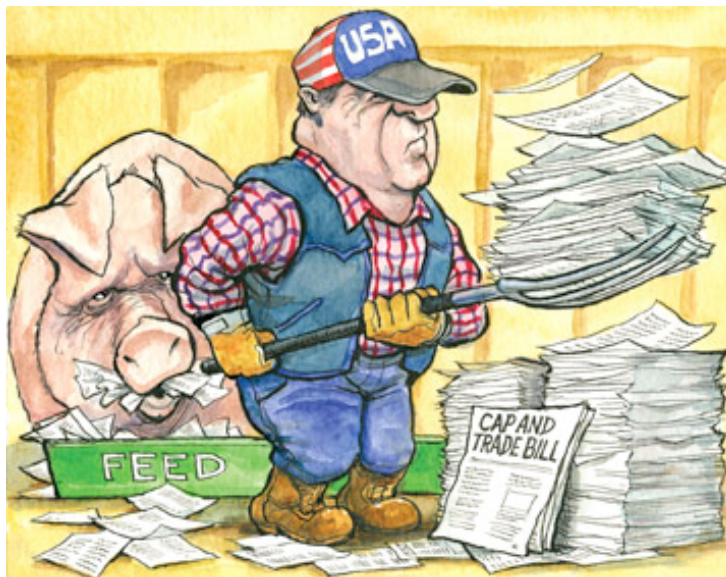
Farmers v greens

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The biggest obstacle to a climate-change bill is rural America

Illustration by KAL



AMERICA will not pass a cap-and-trade law in time for the global climate-change summit in Copenhagen next month. To understand why, it helps to ask a farmer. Take Bruce Wright, for example, who grows wheat and other crops on a couple of thousand acres near Bozeman, Montana. His family has tilled these fields for four generations. His great-grandfather built the local church. He loves his job and the rural way of life. But he fears that higher energy prices will endanger both.

To grow his crops, Mr Wright needs fertiliser, fuel and pesticides—all of which are derived from oil. When the price of oil hit the sky last year, Mr Wright's operating costs nearly trebled. He survived because the oil-price surge also forced up the price of grain. But such wild swings make him nervous. If he has to invest three times as much in his crop and the crop fails, he says, he will be buried in debt.

Mr Wright has nothing against alternative energy. He grows camelina, a type of oilseed, to make biodiesel. He cares about energy-efficiency, too: his watering system is powered by gravity, as the water

is piped down from the nearby mountains. But he cannot see how he could run his farm without cheap fossil fuels. The work that four generations ago was done by men and horses is now mostly done by machines. He has no full-time employees, but owns about 20 vehicles, plus another 20 broken-down ones he tinkers with or plunders for parts.

Barack Obama wants to save the world by curbing carbon-dioxide emissions. Earlier this year the House of Representatives voted to erect a "cap-and-trade" system, which would set a ceiling on such emissions and lower it each year. The government would issue tradable permits to emit carbon, at first by giving 85% of them away, but eventually by auctioning them. The bill is complex, and many of its costs are pushed several years into the future. But the main point is to discourage the use of high-carbon fossil fuels. If it does not make them more expensive, it will not work. That alarms people like Mr Wright.

Rural Americans are on average poorer than their urban compatriots, and rely more on fossil fuel. Their draughty homes cost more to heat than snug apartments. Their tractors are seldom solar-powered. They cannot ride the subway to work, or haul their hogs by bicycle. Even rural folk whose jobs are not energy-intensive—Mr Wright's wife, for example, is a telecommuter—must drive miles to the shops, or to visit friends. A study by Michael Cragg and Matthew Kahn found that poor, conservative areas emit more carbon dioxide per head than rich, liberal ones. By an amazing coincidence, the politicians from such areas are much less likely to support carbon curbs. That was why the House cap-and-trade bill had to be sweetened—and made less effective—with hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of giveaways.

The action has now moved to the Senate, where cap-and-trade is proving to be a much tougher sell. House seats are apportioned by population, so California's 37m people get 53 seats and North Dakota's 640,000 get only one. In the Senate, however, every state gets exactly two votes. Sparsely-populated states are thus hugely over-represented: senators representing a mere 11% of America's population can block any bill, since 60 votes out of 100 are needed to guarantee passage. And many of these states depend on coal, the dirtiest commonly-used fuel. Hydropower-blessed California gets only 1% of its electricity from coal; West Virginia gets 98%. Five states get more than 90% of their electric power from coal, and half get more than half.

A time to bribe

Proponents of cap-and-trade reckon they can win in the Senate the same way they did in the House—by buying support. Any final deal is sure to include vast handouts for farmers and subsidies for "clean coal"—the idea that you can burn the stuff and then bury the CO₂ underground. This is hideously expensive and won't work if the CO₂ leaks. But the political appeal of "clean coal" is irresistible. Both of Montana's senators support it. The state's senior senator, Max Baucus, is particularly influential, since he heads the Senate Finance Committee, which will handle parts of the bill. Mr Baucus is worried that his Democratic colleagues are pushing for cuts in emissions too quickly, and argues for a more gradual approach. He is anxious to ease the pain the bill will cause in the short term, though he says he believes that the costs of doing nothing will, in the long term, be much greater. Rising global temperatures threaten not only to flood the homes of America's coastal liberals but also to turn large swathes of the grain-producing heartland into a dustbowl, according to the most alarming predictions.

Yet as the debate has intensified, the number of American voters who believe there is "solid evidence" that the earth is warming has actually fallen, from 77% in 2007 to 57% today, according to the Pew Research Centre. Few voters understand the science. Many are perhaps influenced by the perceived trustworthiness of the people they hear calling for action, the loudest of whom are politicians. Al Gore may be universally admired in Europe, but in America he remains a divisive figure.

The debate about climate change prods all sorts of cultural sore spots: liberal versus conservative, urban versus rural, the coasts against the heartland. To an urban locavore, pricey fuel does not sound so terrible. In his book "\$20 per gallon: How the Inevitable Rise in the Price of Gasoline Will Change Our Lives for the Better", Christopher Steiner, a journalist, rejoices that Americans will eventually give up

driving and move to densely-packed cities where they can walk to the shops. To people like Mr Wright, that sounds like Hell. "It'd be like living in Beijing," he gasps, gazing across an open plain to the mountains in the distance.

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