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Inslee set to tackle global warming in "catbird seat"

By Sam Goldfarb
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WASHINGTON — Even by the standard of an upbeat politician selling the merits of his favorite issue, U.S. Rep. Jay Inslee's optimism is notable.

It's even more surprising considering that Inslee's pet subject is a rather gloomy one: global warming.

Edged forward in a chair in his office recently, Inslee launched into a lengthy explanation of the steps he said "will allow us to whup global warming, soundly." They include investing in renewable energy, increasing fuel efficiency for cars and capping greenhouse gas emissions.

His optimism is not entirely unfounded. With Democrats in control of Congress, energy and environmental issues — including global warming — are on the legislative agenda.

U.S. Rep. Jim McDermott, D-Seattle, who now chairs a subcommittee on the influential Ways and Means Committee, has promised to fight oil companies with tax legislation. Democratic U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, a member of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, also lists combating global warming as a priority.

And last week, Inslee, D-Bainbridge Island, finally got a spot on the panel he's coveted for years: the energy and air subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, where legislation affecting energy and global warming will be crafted.

"I'm in the catbird seat on dealing with energy policy in the Congress," Inslee boasted.

Yet he faces a considerable obstacle from within his own party. Energy Committee Chairman John Dingell of Michigan has consistently supported the domestic auto industry's positions on gas mileage and emissions.

Inslee is known for his strong opinions and rhetorical passion; he's second to none when it comes to Bush bashing. But on the subject of 80-year-old Dingell, he's diplomatic.

"This challenge demands optimism," Inslee said. "There are going to be disagreements about the automotive sector, and that's going to be no surprise. But it's not the only sector of energy. I think Chairman Dingell is going to be very active in moving us forward in a whole host of other sectors as well."

Particularly, Inslee said, he expects Dingle to support investing in biofuels, an increasingly popular notion among members of both parties because they are renewable and have the potential to help farmers.

As part of their first-100-hours agenda, Democratic House leaders scheduled a vote today on an energy bill that aims to finance the development of biofuels such as corn-based ethanol and other forms of renewable energy by removing recent tax breaks granted to the oil and gas industry.

In the Senate, an energy bill likely will take much longer to come to a vote. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada has said he would prefer to move such a bill more methodically.

But in a surprising development last week, Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, who has long resisted policies he felt might hurt the oil industry, introduced a bill that would boost average automobile fuel-economy standards from 27.5 miles per gallon to 40 miles by 2017.

That's five miles per gallon more than the standard proposed by Cantwell, who has sparred with Stevens over oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Still, Inslee said that setting higher fuel-economy standards will be harder than investing in renewable energy. And capping emissions of greenhouse gases will be even more difficult because of the staunch resistance of industry, he said.