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OVERNIGHT ENERGY: Chu, Issa face off over energy loans

By Andrew Restuccia and Ben Geman - 03/19/12 06:10 PM ET

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State of play: Energy Secretary Steven Chu will be back on Capitol Hill Tuesday for the latest in a series of hearings on the department's embattled loan programs.

Chu will testify before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee on what Republicans on the panel call the "management challenges" in overseeing the loan program.

Republicans have made Chu a top target of their investigation into the loan program, alleging that he failed to adequately vet companies that received taxpayer-backed loans.

The GOP probe reached a fever pitch in September when Solyndra, the California solar panel maker that received a \$535 million loan guarantee in 2009, filed for bankruptcy.

If previews offered by Republicans and Democrats are any indication, the hearing is certain to be dramatic.

Committee Chairman Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) is slated to unveil a staff memo that alleges the department "manipulated analysis, ignored objections from career professionals and strategically modified loan evaluations in order to force project funding out the door," **according to *The New York Times*.**

The Energy Department aggressively pushed back on Issa's allegations Monday. Read more about that **here**.

Meanwhile, committee Democrats will work to undercut Issa's credibility by arguing that Issa **has launched "unsubstantiated" investigations** into Energy Department projects.

Expect more of the same from Chu. In past hearings he has stood by the loan program, while expressing regret that Solyndra went belly up. The loan guarantee program, he says, is meant to support companies that might not attract private financing, so it is inherently risky.

Chu will argue that the Energy Department is a job creator and has contributed

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to the economic recovery.

“We are supporting more than 15,000 projects across the country,” Chu will say, according to his [written testimony](#). “And since the summer of 2010, we have consistently supported between 40,000 and 50,000 direct jobs each quarter, and likely thousands more throughout the supply chain.”

He will call oversight of the department’s stimulus programs “a top priority,” while welcoming “sincere” outside reviews by Congress and others.

“I have spent my career as a scientist. Rigorous peer review and double-checking someone else’s findings are fundamental to a sound scientific process — and I believe the same is true in government,” he will say. “So I welcome any and every sincere effort at oversight, and where we find mistakes, we have and we will move swiftly to correct them. I hope today can be an opportunity to have a serious, substantive dialogue.”

Issa’s investigation, which focuses on the loan program broadly, complements a year-long probe of the Solyndra loan being conducted by House Energy and Commerce Committee Republicans.

The Solyndra investigation has found no evidence that the loan was approved for political reasons. But the probe has uncovered information that’s embarrassing and politically damaging to the administration, including that top officials questioned the wisdom of issuing the loan.

Democrats and administration officials have alleged that Republicans are using their investigations of the Energy Department to score political points during an election year.

NEWS BITES:

Commerce Department to weigh in on solar trade case

The Commerce Department will make a preliminary decision Tuesday on whether to impose fines on Chinese solar imports amid allegations that the country is engaging in unfair trade practices.

The decision will mark the latest step in the ongoing trade case filed by a handful of U.S. solar panel makers. The companies allege China is flooding the U.S. market with underpriced solar panels and subsidizing its solar industry in a way that violates World Trade Organization rules.

The petition has caused a rift in the solar industry, with power generators and others who have benefit from low-price panels raising concerns that the petition will drive up costs.

Read more about the case [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Bingaman circulating nuclear waste management bill

Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) has drafted legislation to implement the recommendations of a federal task force on nuclear waste management.

Committee spokesman Bill Wicker says the bill is “a very preliminary discussion draft.” Bingaman is circulating the draft among a group of senators — including Sens. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) — who are working to develop bipartisan legislation on the issue.

But the draft has not yet been made public.

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“These senators and their staffs are in the process of studying that draft, and we haven’t heard back from them yet,” Wicker said in an email. “Of course, Sen. Bingaman wants to respect their ability to sort through that draft and offer feedback before he circulates this legislation more broadly.”

The federal task force, known as the Blue Ribbon Commission on America’s Nuclear Future, released a report in January that called on policymakers to quickly establish at least one site to permanently dispose of the country’s nuclear waste.

Policymakers have struggled for years to establish such a site amid a decades-long fight over the proposed nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain.

Read more about the report [here](#).

Baldwin keeps up attack on Inhofe

Lefty actor Alec Baldwin is doubling down on his [Twitter attacks](#) against Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), comments that a spokesman for the conservative senator [calls “outrageous.”](#)

Baldwin, after calling Inhofe an “oil whore” on the social media site over the weekend, explained on Twitter Monday afternoon that it’s Inhofe’s global warming stance that got him going.

“I attack Inhofe because he is a climate change denier,” Baldwin tweeted.

EPA air chief to face Senate panel

Speaking of Inhofe, expect some sharp questions from the Oklahoma Republican and other critics of the Environmental Protection Agency when the agency’s top air pollution regulator appears before a Senate panel Tuesday.

EPA’s Gina McCarthy will testify before a panel of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee — where Inhofe is the top Republican — about [EPA’s new rules](#) to curb mercury and other air toxics from coal-fired power plants.

Inhofe is [pushing legislation](#) to kill the regulations that he and other Republicans call economically burdensome and a threat to power reliability.

EPA and other defenders of the rule point to agency studies forecasting huge public health gains. They also say the rules provide ample flexibility to prevent reliability problems, pointing to studies by the Congressional Research Service and the Energy Department showing the lights won’t go out.

Elsewhere on Capitol Hill ...

Tuesday’s hearings with EPA’s McCarthy and Energy Secretary Steven Chu will be just a few of the many energy-related hearings on Capitol Hill tomorrow.

Among the highlights:

The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee will hear from White House nominees for several energy-related jobs.

- A House Energy and Commerce Committee panel will hold a hearing on oil sands technology.

- A House Natural Resources Committee panel will hear from Bureau of Land Management Director Bob Abbey, who last week said the recent dip in federal lands oil production after years of gains stems from market forces.

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- Obama is main target in House races, GOP says
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- OVERNIGHT MONEY: House GOP budget lowers spending cap, includes tax code overhaul
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- Wyden ‘can’t imagine’ voting for Ryan budget, despite partnership on Medicare
- Democrats hail health law’s benefits for seniors ahead of GOP budget release

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- Obama urges House GOP to ‘follow the Senate’s lead’ on \$109B highway bill
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- Wife of Afghan suspect asks ‘I want to know how this could be’
- Senators to Pentagon: No troop cuts until Congress gets a say in budget
- White House picks nominees for key Pentagon

Off Capitol Hill ...

Energy Central's **EnergyBiz Leadership Forum** gets going Tuesday and will feature remarks from top execs with power companies including American Electric Power, Dominion and PG&E.

Sens. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.) and Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) will headline a morning *National Journal* event on natural gas at D.C.'s Newseum.

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT...

Here's a quick roundup of E2's stories from Monday and the weekend:

- Nuke industry, facing headwinds, **launches multimillion-dollar ad campaign**
- Democrat Cummings **blasts Issa** for 'unsubstantiated' Energy Dept. probes
- Poll: Support for offshore drilling **returns to pre-spill levels**
- Alec Baldwin says GOP climate warrior **should retire** to 'solar-powered gay bar'
- The Hill Poll: **Voter gloom** over Obama's jobs, gas, debt policies
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Please send tips and comments to Ben Geman, ben.geman@thehill.com, and Andrew Restuccia, arestuccia@thehill.com.

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