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By Robin Bravender

In his first State of the Union address to two Republican-controlled chambers of Congress, expect President Obama to come out swinging tonight on energy and the environment.

The president has grown increasingly confrontational toward the legislative branch in recent years during his annual speeches. And as newly empowered congressional Republicans have put Obama's energy agenda in their cross hairs -- and now that Obama isn't facing re-election or looming midterms -- the president is likely to double down on his go-it-alone strategy when it comes to climate and environmental issues.

"I would suspect it's going to be fairly combative," said Eric Washburn, a former Senate Democratic leadership aide who's now an energy industry lobbyist at Bracewell & Giuliani. "I would imagine him pursuing a bit of a populist contrast with Congress."

Obama said Saturday that he'll "call on this new Congress to join me in putting aside the political games and finding areas where we agree so we can deliver for the American people."

But as he lays out his energy and climate priorities, he's unlikely to find much common ground with Republican lawmakers.

The president is likely to tout the recent climate deal between the United States and China, ongoing work to tackle climate change through U.S. EPA regulations and other big-ticket environmental rules his administration is looking to wrap up before he leaves office. His pitch for broad tax reforms could also include reiterating his call to end tax breaks to oil companies.

That's all likely to ruffle feathers among the GOP and Obama's critics in industry, many of whom have urged the president to strike a conciliatory tone in his speech tonight.

Voters in November "called for President Obama to cooperate with Congress," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said during a speech Friday. "On that front, we've got some distance to cover. ... But Tuesday can be a new day. This can be the moment the president pivots to a positive posture."

Opponents bracing for familiar rhetoric

Obama's critics among business trade groups aren't expecting to like what they hear on the energy front tonight.

"I think that the president has started to make it clear that he has a vision for the country, and he is going to use every tool within the executive branch -- and, frankly, some that don't exist legally -- to implement that vision," said Christopher Guith, senior vice president for policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Institute for 21st Century Energy.

As usual, Obama is likely to speak in broad terms during his speech, rather than drilling down into policy details. The specific issues that energy stakeholders will be listening for include climate rules to curb methane and power plant emissions, energy exports, water regulations, and nuclear energy strategy.

Obama could mention the controversial Keystone XL oil sands pipeline, although several observers said they're expecting him to steer clear of the hot-button issue. The GOP-led Congress has made forcing Obama's hand on the pipeline a top priority this year, but the White House has pledged to veto legislation that would override the administration.

Some environmentalists are hopeful that Obama will nix the phrase "all of the above" when it comes to discussing his energy priorities. Ahead of his annual address last year, a coalition of green groups asked Obama to jettison the phrase -- typically used to show support for fossil and renewable fuels -- from his vocabulary. The president stuck with it, saying in 2014, "the all-of-the-above energy strategy I announced a few years ago is working" (E&E Daily, Jan. 29, 2014).

"I hope he won't do that again," said **Dan Becker**, director of the **Safe Climate Campaign** and former longtime director of the Sierra Club's global warming program.

The White House signaled that climate science will be a key theme with the announcement yesterday that Nicole Hernandez Hammer, a sea-level rise expert in southeast Florida, will be among the guests hosted by first lady Michelle Obama (Greenwire, Jan. 19).

Becker is hopeful Obama will strike a forceful tone on climate change, particularly with the speech coming on the heels of government scientists' reports that 2014 was Earth's warmest year on record.

Given the state of the science, **Becker** said, he'd like Obama to explain that "we need to take very strong action to cut pollution." With the GOP in charge of both chambers of Congress, he added, Obama "really needs to talk to the American people."

Twitter: @rbravender | Email: rbravender@eenews.net