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Why Waxman-Markey Matters to the Oceans

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The sprawling Waxman-Markey climate and energy bill is headed to the full House and could be voted on as early as late June. The bill's passage would signal real progress in the fight against climate change, but it would also be a vital step in preventing global warming's terrifying cousin: ocean acidification.

As we speak, carbon emissions are changing the ocean's chemistry. Here's a quick ocean acidification primer: the oceans absorb a huge amount of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, which reacts with sea water to produce carbonic acid, reducing the amount of available calcium carbonate that corals and marine life such as crabs, lobsters, clams and oysters depend on to produce their skeletons and shells.

Marine scientists agree that under a business-as-usual scenario, ocean acidification will be devastating for coral reefs within the next 50 years. If we don't get serious climate legislation passed very soon, by 2050 there could be no coral reefs developing anywhere in the world. No joke.

How important are coral reefs, anyway, you ask? According to the National Oceanic and

Atmospheric Administration, coral reefs support more species per unit area than any other marine environment. As the "rainforests of the sea," Coral reefs provide vital economic and environmental services to millions of people around the world -- think food, tourism, erosion prevention and medicinal developments.

When most people think of carbon emissions, they picture smog-filled super-highways and melting ice caps. Yes, those images are accurate, but try this one: it's 2048 and you're snorkeling in the tropics. Something is awry. Where are all the fish, sharks and sea turtles? Why is the reef pale and dissolving? Ocean acidification has kicked in, and we could be headed for a mass extinction event.

Leading coral reef scientist J.E.N. Veron recently talked to [Oceana](#) about how dire the situation could get if nothing is done. "We are looking down the barrel of a big gun," he said, "and we are seeing the end of the Great Barrier Reef."

If we want to prevent the seven seas from becoming hot and sour soup, we need climate legislation now. At the moment, the Waxman-Markey bill, even in its compromised state, is the best chance we've got.