Perhaps a greater concern is how legislation might affect global trade, a key driver of transportation industry growth.

Donohue has engaged in public conflict with members who resigned from the chamber in protest of its global warming position. The chamber also had to rescind its call for a "Scopes Monkey Trial" to examine the veracity of climate change.

What do these activities mean for our industry?

In October, Sens. John Kerry, D-Mass, and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., wrote a column in The New York Times entitled "Yes We Can (Pass Climate Change Legislation)" that expressed their vision of a "clean-energy future that will revitalize our economy."

Sen. James Imhof, R-Okla., one of the notable non-believers in global warming, says he'll go to Copenhagen to deliver a message of political reality — essentially, "No, they can't."

The chamber's disputes provide a clear reflection of how different businesses will react to energy legislation. What does all this mean for freight transportation? What happens if other sources replace traditional fossil fuels? Freight movement would likely shift among modes (pipeline/barge/rail, for example). These changes could be exacerbated by market-distorting policies such as mandates to consume corn-based ethanol.

The National Association of Manufacturers also fears the replacement of fossil fuels would send more jobs abroad. Meanwhile, companies such as Levi Strauss (which resigned from the chamber) worry global warming would devastate nations such as Bangladesh that have become centers of production.

Once again, this represents a zero-sum transportation outcome. Depending on where sourcing ends up, either domestic or international providers will prosper. Permanent modal transitions also will occur as companies aggressively manage their carbon footprints (international air-to-ocean, domestic air-to-truck, truck-to-rail, and even rail-to-barge).

Perhaps a greater concern is how legislation might affect global trade, a key driver of transportation industry growth. The Senate is considering an import duty on items produced in countries with environmental standards less strenuous than ours. The World Trade Organization may not allow such a move, which would hamper our global trade-driven industry with its risk of trade reprisals.

Coal's future is always a major global warming issue. Its supremacy in generating electricity is threatened by more than legislation encouraging nuclear, solar and wind power. Advances in natural gas drilling techniques and technology now place domestic reserves at 100 years of consumption. Some utilities are transitioning to natural gas from coal. Others are using natural gas as a load leveler for electricity generated from solar and wind. The loss of coal business could have a major impact on railroads and barge lines.

Beyond the fact that transportation consumes 70 percent of our nation's oil, two infrastructure issues are relevant to the industry. It is widely accepted that the electrical grid is inadequate, and that this key infrastructure must be protected and enhanced. Hopefully, politicians will recognize the same threat to our insufficient transportation infrastructure.

One solution proposed as part of surface transportation reauthorization was to raise the fuel tax. Unfortunately, both political parties ignored this responsible industry position. It would be disastrous if energy/climate legislation imposed a tax on transportation that did nothing to improve our future capacity.

Although obstacles to climate change legislation are large, most businesses recognize that if Congress fails to act, the Environmental Protection Agency will impose new, tougher regulations. Just two weeks ago, the California Air Resources Board — no stranger to the transportation industry — issued a preliminary rule for the nation's first cap-and-trade program. Ironically, congressional failure to pass a bill could result in stakeholders seeking federal preemption from the EPA and CARB.

As an industry, we must diligently propose and promote responsible political solutions to our complicated problems. Unfortunately, past results are not encouraging, and the fruitless efforts so far on reauthorization reinforces transportation's worry that its essential economic role is just not understood. joc

Ted Prince is principal, T. Prince & Associates. He can be contacted at ted@tpassociatesllc.com.