

Sustainability Newsletter Week 54: Aug. 25-29, 2008.

Topic: Candidate Platforms Revisited



Here are each of the candidates' stances and proposals for 7 environmentally-related topics:

Global Warming:

-Both Barack Obama and John McCain agree that global warming is real, that it is likely to have serious consequences if unattended, that humans are largely responsible, and that the federal government should take an active role to reduce the threat. Both support a cap-and-trade regulation that would set nationwide limits on the amount of carbon that could be emitted, and allot pollution allowances to individual plants and industries so that those that exceed their limits must buy credits from those that do not.

-Obama would aim to cut emissions by 80% below 1990 levels by 2050. His cap-and-trade regulation would also include an auction of all pollution credits (so no polluter retains the right to pollute for free) and he plans to use the money generated to pursue aggressive renewable energy and energy efficiency goals that would also, he says, create millions of new "green collar" jobs.

-McCain was an early champion of cap-and-trade in the Senate and last supported a 60% cut below 1990 levels of pollution. He would allot credits to existing polluters, rather than auctioning them off.

National Security:

-Besides posing serious threats to the environment and to human health and safety, global warming could destabilize already volatile nations. The United Nations recently identified Southeast Asia as a "hot spot" for the political effects of global warming, as governments there could be too weak to respond adequately to extreme weather events, triggering political chaos.

-Obama's goal is to wean the nation off of Middle Eastern and Venezuelan oil within 10 years, invest heavily in renewable energy technologies, and improve the energy efficiency of cars and buildings. He has a \$150 billion plan to do it. He would enact new rules to make burning coal more expensive, and to encourage the use of alternatives. Both Obama and McCain have discussed energy independence as a national security issue, but the Democratic platform explicitly links climate change to future international political instability.

-McCain puts drilling for more oil and building more nuclear power plants at the center of his energy policy. While he would support various strategies to increase

the use of renewable and alternative forms of energy, including "clean coal," his most detailed proposals involve offshore oil drilling and more nuclear power. Offshore oil drilling would not decrease the need for imports significantly, and investing in new oil production would mean burning oil for longer, exacerbating global warming. Nuclear power would provide an abundant, though controversial, form of domestic electricity.

Offshore Oil Drilling:

-Drilling for oil in the outer continental shelf, primarily off the coasts of California and Florida, would yield about 200,000 barrels a day, but not for 10 years, according to an Energy Information Administration analysis. Even if companies drill more oil (some estimate there's 400,000 or even 1 million barrels a day available, at current prices) or access it more quickly, there wouldn't be enough, most experts agree, to have a significant effect on prices.

-President Bush already lifted an executive ban on offshore drilling, so legally, the only prevention would be Congress. Therefore, the next president would only be able to affect change by throwing around political weight.

-Obama would accept offshore drilling only as part of a compromise to achieve broader energy policy goals, which include massive investments in renewable and alternative energy.

-Offshore drilling holds the No. 1 position in John McCain's energy policy and stump speech.

Energy Costs:

-The cost of oil peaked above \$140 a barrel this summer, nearly double the price a year earlier. Gas prices followed suit, peaking well above \$4 a gallon. Heating oil prices started climbing to record levels months before heating season. The cost of coal tripled in about a year's time, leading electric power producers (which produce 50% of U.S. electricity by burning coal) to increase rates. Natural gas prices doubled in a year's time before plummeting in July.

-Obama would enact a profits tax on oil companies, and use the money to give families each a \$1,000 "Emergency Energy Rebate." By investing in plug-in hybrid cars and boosting fuel economy, he would aim to reduce oil imports – and fuel consumed – dramatically through increasing efficiency. He would also take expensive grades of oil stored in the Strategic Petroleum Reserve and swap it for cheaper grades. Obama has pledged to spend money generated by a cap-and-trade regulation designed to lower carbon emissions on projects to boost home energy efficiency and to provide credits to people struggling to pay higher electricity bills. He would require local utilities to derive 25% of energy from renewable sources by 2025, thereby decreasing reliance on fossil fuels.

-John McCain tops his agenda with expanding domestic production of oil and natural gas, though experts criticize the idea because it would have no effect on prices for about a decade, and the effect would be small. He would offer a \$5,000 tax break to those who buy zero-carbon vehicles, (McCain is counting on a hefty tax credit to create an incentive for car-makers to develop these cars), and a \$300 million prize for anyone who develops a battery good enough to make electric cars feasible. He'd eliminate the 54-cent-a-gallon tariff on imported ethanol, which experts say would have a modest effect on price. He opposes a windfall profits tax on oil companies, which could presumably mean oil companies might pass record profits on to consumers in the form of lower prices. McCain would focus on improving the energy efficiency of the federal government, the largest single power consumer in the U.S., which would save taxpayers some on energy costs and could drive down prices by slackening demand. He would also try to install "SmartMeters" in households so individuals can better monitor their energy consumption and its cost, with the goal of inspiring people to use and spend less. He would create predictable tax incentives for wind, solar and other renewable energy sources, thereby decreasing dependence on volatile fossil fuels.

Ethanol:

-Corn requires a lot of fertilizer (much of it derived from natural gas) and pesticides (derived from chemicals). Corn-based ethanol is only slightly less polluting than oil. Even if every arable acre of land in the United States was planted with corn, it would only produce about 12% of the gasoline we burn today. Congressional mandates for corn-based ethanol led farmers to plant more acres of corn than at any other time in decades. That contributed to a near-record dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico--a lifeless, oxygen-depleted area the size of New Jersey that forms when fertilizer discharges from Mississippi Valley farms.

-While Obama often acknowledges that cellulosic ethanol is a more attractive alternative fuel than corn-based ethanol, he has been criticized for taking his cues on ethanol and farm policy from the corn growers who have contributed to his campaigns as an Illinois Democrat. He has advisors to his campaign with strong ties to the ethanol industry, and he would maintain subsidies and tariffs that support the industry. During the early days of his race for the Democratic nomination, he published a detailed energy plan that included the goal of producing 60 billion gallons by 2030 and transforming the entire U.S. vehicle fleet to run on E85 ethanol blends of gasoline. The word "ethanol" is now hard to find on Obama's website.

-McCain has opposed subsidies for corn growers at times, and though he has flip-flopped somewhat on the issue as a candidate, he has talked about opposing subsidies for corn growers. He strongly opposes the tariff on Brazilian ethanol, which protects domestic corn growers. In general, he supports the use of ethanol

and the development of cellulosic ethanol, but doesn't lay out many specifics about the issue in his Lexington Project energy plan.

Food and Product Safety:

-The last two years have seen countless recalls of toxic products and contaminated foods. Evidence continues to mount that some common chemicals are harmful, and criticisms have mounted that the government watchdogs appointed to police consumer goods and food are unwilling or unable to do the job.

-Neither major party has made consumer product and food safety a central part of its agenda for the next administration. Neither major party candidate has any information on his website about the issue. (Barack Obama did, in the primary campaign, discuss the need to better regulate the factory farms that have contributed to the outbreaks of E. coli-tainted beef).

Nuclear Energy:

-Nuclear power plants produce nearly 20% of the nation's electricity at 104 plants. For the first time in a generation, the industry is trying to build new nuclear reactors (as many as 19 projects in 15 states).

-Obama always acknowledges the arguments against nuclear power, mainly safety and radioactive waste, but he doesn't oppose the use of nuclear power. When it comes to electricity, however, his energy plan focuses on re-distributing cash from the oil and coal industries to renewable energy, rather than nuclear.

-McCain has made expanding nuclear power a central part of his energy platform by calling for the construction of 45 new plants by 2030. Accomplishing that goal would require aggressive government subsidies or policies, perhaps including a global warming cap-and-trade regulation that would increase the cost of coal.

(Source: <http://www.thedailygreen.com/environmental-news/latest/green-elections-guide-47082517>).

The Obama Campaign site: <https://donate.barackobama.com/page/content/splashsignup/>

The McCain Campaign site: <http://www.exploremccain.com/>

