

Environmental Stakes Are High In the Upcoming Presidential Election

Obama's Record Is Mixed Bag but Republican Victory Would Reverse Environmental Progress

By Walter and Nan Simpson

Earth Day is more than celebrating the little things we do to protect the environment. It's time to look more broadly at environmental policy and take our planet's pulse.

Are we doing enough to protect nature and endangered species and reduce air and water pollution? Are we maximizing the green jobs and public health benefits of environmental protection? Are we rapidly developing new green technologies to compete with global green export leaders like China and Germany?

Daring to answer these questions honestly is difficult. We all have our own priorities and problems. We are endlessly distracted by cell phones, computers, video games, hundreds of TV channels, advertising and shopping. We lead busy lives, detached from nature.

Few people want to be troubled by "inconvenient truths" that require significant action and sacrifice. Besides, polluting industries and their friends constantly reassure us there's no problem. Case in point is the 1,000 pound polar bear in the room -- climate change -- the most serious environmental problem ever.

With so much at stake, it's never been more important to cast a vote for the environment than in the 2012 presidential election.

Republican Tea Party Politics at Odds with Environment

This election cycle Republican Party presidential candidates abandoned contact with the political middle, veering further and further right to satisfy their radical conservative Tea Party and evangelical Christian base. This has adversely affected their position on environmental protection.

While the bloodstream of the average American infant contains hundreds of industrial chemicals and children's asthma rates have skyrocketed, all Republican candidates have criticized environmental regulations that would control pollution. Michele Bachmann, Rick Perry, Herman Cain, and Ron Paul actually called for the abolition of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

This rejection of environmentalism is fundamentally out of touch with mainstream America as well as with the Republican Party's environmental legacy. Republican President Teddy Roosevelt protected millions of acres of forest land and created fifty wildlife refuges and five

national parks a century ago. Republican President Richard Nixon responded to the first Earth Day in 1970 by approving landmark clean air, clean water, toxic substances control, marine mammal protection, and endangered species legislation. It was Nixon, not a liberal Democrat, who created the EPA. And in 1990 President George H.W. Bush approved “cap and trade” to control acid rain emissions.

After bruising debates and primaries, Mitt Romney is now the presumptive Republican nominee for president. His corporate raider history and “corporations are people” philosophy promise a pro-big business bias antithetical to environmental protection. Not surprisingly, if elected, Romney has pledged to:

- Accelerate oil and gas drilling including in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
- Approve the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline
- Repeal new EPA coal plant pollution rules
- Block EPA implementation of “maximum achievable control technology” designed to reduce industrial air pollution
- End EPA programs that address climate change by regulating carbon dioxide emissions

Romney and his chief challenger Rick Santorum falsely claimed that more domestic oil drilling would lower gasoline prices. In fact, oil prices are set internationally and the U.S. cannot produce enough additional oil to affect them.

In January, Romney and other Republican candidates criticized Obama for not expediting approval of the Keystone pipeline to bring Alberta tar sands oil to U.S. Gulf Coast refineries. However, America’s leading climate scientist, NASA’s Dr. Jim Hansen, calls the pipeline “game over” for climate change. Hansen and environmental leaders like Bill McKibben of www.350.org argue that we’ll lose the battle against climate change if the vast stock of carbon in world coal and tar sands reserves is released into the atmosphere, further accelerating warming.

Mitt Romney’s views on climate change are more nuanced than those of Rick Santorum who during his campaign referred to the threat as a “hoax” and “patently absurd.” In contrast, Romney said in his recent book, *“No Apology: the Case for American Greatness,”* that he believes that climate change is real and to some extent caused by human activity.

This coincides with Romney’s earlier behavior. In 2004, as governor of Massachusetts, he issued a 72 Point Climate Protection Plan. He also initially supported (though later rejected) the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from power plants in nine Northeast states including New York.

While Romney stated in *“No Apology”* that “Internationally, we should work to limit the increase in emissions in global greenhouse gases,” he doesn’t recognize that a significant overall reduction in emissions is needed. Nor does he support mandatory controls necessary to achieve those reductions. Worse, Romney has now backtracked. His current view is “we don’t know what’s causing climate change on this planet.”

Climate Change Issue Is Central

Despite what you hear from Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, and other fossil fuel industry apologists, climate change is real, already occurring, and principally caused by human activity – releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere by burning coal, oil, and natural gas and to a lesser extent by destroying forests. If we don't act soon, we'll be cooked – figuratively and literally.

Our present “business as usual” trajectory is leading to a hostile and unsustainable world. The Earth's surface temperature could be an average ten degrees warmer by the end of the century. We can spare our children and grandchildren this hellish hothouse future by rapidly shifting from fossil fuels to clean renewable energy resources like wind, solar, biomass, and geothermal -- coupled with much greater energy conservation and efficiency.

This is not a hoax, a conspiracy, or mere speculation. These conclusions are scientifically established and endorsed by the:

- U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change -- representing thousands of scientists in 195 countries
- U.S. Academy of Sciences and academies in over 30 other countries
- American Association for the Advancement of Science
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
- American Meteorological Society

In fact, virtually every scientific organization with credible climate expertise acknowledges the reality of human-caused climate change and the need to quickly transition away from fossil fuels.

Many other experts have concluded that the costs of addressing climate change would be far less than those associated with coping with its devastating aftermath. Furthermore, a serious effort would significantly reduce respiratory illness and provide a bonanza of green jobs. Imagine the jobs created by super-insulating and solarizing every house in Western New York!

While Obama's environmental record is not perfect, he's committed to environmental progress. He understands and respects the international scientific consensus on climate change and the increasingly urgent calls for action from expert scientists.

Obama's Environmental Accomplishments

The positive impact of a generally pro-environment Obama presidency is evident in Western New York. EPA Region 2 Administrator Judith Enck has strongly supported local efforts, led by the Clean Air Coalition of WNY, to curtail toxic industrial pollution from Tonawanda Coke.

Nationally, the Obama Administration has:

- Incorporated clean energy projects into “stimulus” spending

- Helped double renewable energy production
- Established EPA greenhouse gas emissions reduction rules for large stationary sources, vehicles, and new power plants
- Raised fuel economy standards to 54.5 mpg by 2025
- Reduced water pollution in the Great Lakes, Chesapeake Bay, and elsewhere
- Set strict rules against mercury and other toxic emissions from coal-fired power plants
- Restricted new mountain top removal coal mining
- Reinstated the Roadless Area Rule protecting 58.5 million acres of wilderness
- Sought to end \$4 billion in annual taxpayer subsidies to the oil industry

These and other actions constitute a solid record of environmental achievement. But the Obama environmental record is not without disappointments.

Obama's handling of the 2010 BP oil spill received mixed grades. Sierra Club praised Obama's mercury rule and fuel economy achievements but wished for more. Grassroots groups want more protection for endangered species. Greenpeace called Obama's environmental performance "mediocre at best." And highly respected physicist and climate blogger Joe Romm (www.thinkprogress.org/romm) gave Obama an "F" grade because he hasn't done enough to address the climate emergency.

The Obama Administration's "all of the above" energy policy fails to consistently address environmental concerns. In the aftermath of the largest oil spill in U.S. history Obama accelerated oil and gas drilling -- even allowing Shell to drill in the Arctic Ocean where spills can't be cleaned up. The Administration both announced new EPA rules that will prevent most new U.S. coal plant construction and opened vast new areas of Wyoming to coal mining.

Then, there's the Keystone XL pipeline. After 8,000 people were arrested in front of the White House last fall protesting the pipeline, Obama won environmental praise for postponing decision on it until 2013. But last month, during all-time record-breaking March temperatures, he approved the pipeline's southern portion. In further irony, he made the announcement in Cushing, Oklahoma, the site of recent severe drought, tornadoes, ice storms, and wildfires.

Climate Protection Legislation Failure

However, President Obama's greatest environmental lapse was his failure to provide adequate leadership and support for national climate protection legislation in 2009. The result was a disastrously compromised House bill that no one liked and that could not pass the Senate. As a result, the U.S. still doesn't have a comprehensive and coherent climate action policy.

Defeats like this are inevitable unless the American public is better educated, false propaganda countered, and political will instilled. But Obama's bully-pulpit was MIA. Writing in *Rolling Stone* magazine, Nobel Prize-winner and former VP Al Gore faulted the president for never having "presented to the American people the magnitude of the climate crisis. He has simply not made the case for action."

Of course, in the president's defense one could say he was busy dealing with an inherited severe recession and two wars also not of his making. Moreover, he was thwarted by coal-state Democrats and a climate change-denying, filibuster-wielding Republican Party singularly bent on denying Obama a second term.

These are mitigating circumstances but they don't excuse. Scientists say we need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80-90% by 2050 to avoid runaway catastrophic climate change. Enacting laws to accomplish that will now be even more difficult because of the Supreme Court's "Citizens United" decision which opened the floodgates of corporate money into politics.

Environmental Candidate of Choice

While President Barack Obama has not yet delivered on some environmental priorities, his environmental record is solid in many areas. He appears to be committed to addressing environmental problems in a meaningful way within the constraints of what he views as politically possible.

Obama's re-election offers the promise of continuing his pro-environment programs and the hope he will do more in his second term. Cleaner air, water, and energy mean tens of thousands of green jobs with improved public health outcomes that reduce healthcare costs. The President understands this win-win. Additionally, Obama is likely to do more on climate change in a second term if re-elected with a Democratic Congress and an increasingly informed public demanding action on this life and death issue.

We know none of this will happen if Mitt Romney is elected our next president. Worse, given the GOP's radical turn, a Republican victory would take us in reverse -- undermining and eliminating laws and regulations that now protect our environment and public health.

The critically important environmental vote goes to Barack Obama.

* * * * *

Walter and Nan Simpson are local environmental educators and activists who live in Amherst. Nan is a registered nurse and Walter is an energy professional whose website is www.energyreallymatters.com.