

Energy and the environment

by By the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Protecting our air, water and land is not a partisan matter. Neither is protecting our planet from global warming. Both are matters of fact, economics and common sense.

Americans want change. They want to see science - not party ideology - restored as the foundation of public policy, especially when it comes to energy and the environment.

Here are some steps Congress can and should take now. Advertisement

- Energy policy. The United States needs a balanced energy policy that relies not just on producing more oil, gas and coal but also on conservation and a serious commitment to alternative energy. Congress should enact higher fuel economy standards, even though they're not popular with all Detroit automakers. Already, some automakers, notably Toyota and Ford, are cashing in on the growing demand for hybrids and gas-sippers.

Congress must set goals for federal and state governments to use less oil and gasoline by switching to vehicles that get better mileage and/or burn ethanol. It should encourage more service stations to install pumps for E85 fuel, one that many new vehicles can use but drivers often can't find.

Changes in tax policy could encourage American businesses and individuals to make smarter energy choices and provide tax incentives for the construction of energy efficient buildings and those that use energy sources such as solar power. Congress also should set goals to encourage large utilities to generate more power from alternative or renewable sources, such as hydroelectric and wind power.

- Global warming. Over the last six years, the Bush administration and the Republican congressional majority tried to dismiss the huge body of data on global warming. Scientists know better. In the court of public opinion, the administration already looks foolish for refusing to acknowledge the reality of global warming, our role in it and the consequences of it. The longer we wait to address the problem, the more expensive and difficult it becomes.

Congress must regulate emissions of greenhouse gases, even though the United States did not sign the international Kyoto Protocol. There's widespread agreement that a market-based "cap-and-trade" system such as that now used for reducing pollution that contributes to acid rain would be a good approach. It also would demonstrate to other nations that we feel a sense of urgency. - Protecting air, water and our national lands. The Bush administration has been pursuing an Orwellian strategy by pushing such policies as "Clear Skies" to relax air pollution controls and "Healthy Forests" to open more national forest to logging. When it failed to win congressional approval, the administration tried to implement those policies by re-writing regulations. The

federal courts slapped down a recent attempt to weaken a rule that required older coal-fired power plants to install new pollution controls. But Congress needs to close loopholes that encourage utilities to keep using obsolete and dirty coal-fired plants.

Congress also should restore the Clinton-era roadless wilderness rules in National Wilderness areas and rescind a Bush administration rule giving state governments more say in how that land is protected from development. And it should revisit decisions that opened millions of acres of protected lands to oil and gas drilling and mining.

Although the details of how to reach them may differ, there is broad public consensus on environmental and energy goals. The American people don't want to live with polluted air, water and land. We understand the need to conserve fuel. We are impatient for new energy sources that will lessen our dependence on oil - with all its political ramifications - and reduce greenhouse emissions. We don't want our National Forests exploited by timber companies or our public lands despoiled by drilling and development.

The challenge for the new Congress will be to build a sensible, forward-looking strategy on this common ground. Our health and the health of the planet demand it.

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