

# A Time for Global Leadership—by Land, by Sea, by Air

*The new President must make the environmental case to the American people*

by Bruce Babbitt

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President-elect Barack Obama must tackle three major environmental and natural resource issues upon taking office: (1) global warming; (2) oceans policy; and (3) stewardship of our public lands.

## I. Global Warming

Global warming is rapidly degrading our planet, causing widespread extinctions, driving rising sea levels and coastal flooding, and triggering climate extremes and droughts that threaten to destabilize communities throughout the world.

Thanks in large measure to President George W. Bush and Vice President Richard Cheney, global warming is widely perceived, however, as something of an environmental hobby horse, of concern to scientists but without much effect on our daily lives or future. It will fall to the next president to change that perception by explaining to the American people, beginning with his inaugural address, that global warming is a national security threat and an impending human and economic crisis.

Global warming is a national security issue because it threatens to destabilize entire nations and displace hundreds of millions of people from low-lying coastal areas and drought-stricken regions, creating still more failed states and fueling terrorism and instability. The president must explain these facts to the American people.

Global warming will impose enormous negative costs on our economy to cope with relocation away from coastal areas, shifting patterns of agriculture, and health threats, to name a few. The president must also explain these facts to the American people.

President-elect Obama must address this threat quickly and forcefully, beginning with a comprehensive national energy policy. The president should create a National Energy Security Council, charging it to formulate an aggressive national policy to quickly reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and move toward a sustainable energy economy.

The next president must bring government consensus—and prompt action—to the following issues:

- (1) Enact cap-and-trade legislation, designed to ratchet down carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions in the most efficient manner. Cap and trade has been successfully used to reduce sulfur emissions; cap-and-trade programs are being implemented in Europe and in the New England states. The models are available, and there is no excuse for further delay.
- (2) Enact strong national legislation to set up regulatory mandates and incentives for energy conservation. Again, the models for action are readily available. California has led the way; that state uses 50% less energy per capita than the national average.
- (3) Prepare a comprehensive national budget to dramatically increase research and development to accelerate the transition to sustainable energy use. Prepared by the National Energy Security Council, it should include a crash program to develop and implement carbon sequestration technology for coal-burning electric power plants. A national research and development program will also provide opportunities to renew and grow our economy—the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change makes the case very persuasively. Stimulus programs, including job creation, should be linked to the necessary energy transformation in the economy.
- (4) Guide the United States into talks leading up to a global deal following from expiration of the Kyoto Protocol. The new president should appoint a high-level negotiator with ambassadorial rank to represent him at the Copenhagen negotiations in 2009—and to work closely with Congress to assure that any agreements coming out of Copenhagen do not die on arrival for congressional action.

- (5) Ensure that conservation of biodiversity and protection of the forests and ecosystems play a major role in mitigating global warming. The destruction of forests through uncontrolled logging, expansion of livestock grazing and other causes contributes an astonishing 20% of ongoing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions into the atmosphere—more than the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> from all the planes, trains, and automobiles on earth. The key to saving forests, including species-rich tropical forests, is to provide economic incentives for local communities to protect their forests. That can be achieved by making forest protection eligible for carbon credits in an international cap-and-trade system. Including forest carbon in an international trading system is a complex issue, but the payoff will be huge. Forest protection should be an integral part of both domestic legislation and front and center in the Copenhagen negotiations.

## II. Oceans Policy

The oceans, which cover more than 70% of our planet, are a critical resource that has long been neglected. Ocean fisheries feed more than a billion people. Fish stocks and coral reefs are rapidly declining from overfishing, pollution, and the effects of global warming.

President-elect Obama should lead a worldwide campaign to revitalize ocean fisheries. The cap-and-trade concept can be effectively applied to the conservation of ocean fisheries. Often referred to as “catch shares,” it works by setting a sustainable limit to a fishery and then giving fishers a fixed percentage share of the catch that can be utilized or traded within the overall catch limit. Alaska halibut and the Mexico spiny lobster fisheries are just two successful examples of catch share fishery management that has restored fish stocks and increased sustainable yields.

President-elect Obama should charge his Administration to implement catch share programs, to work with the states to rationalize ocean fishery administration, to expand our system of marine-protected areas, to push for stronger and more comprehensive international agreements regulating transboundary fish stocks, as well as U.S. Senate ratification of the Law of the Sea Treaty.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), buried in the depths of the U.S. Department of Commerce, is an underfunded and underutilized government agency. President-elect Obama should energize NOAA, mandating the agency to lead a worldwide effort to save our oceans.

## III. Public Lands

The public lands—our magnificent system of national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges, and lands administered by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management—are a national treasure, admired and emulated the world over.

The Bush Administration has devoted its energies to undermining our public land heritage by diluting protections for parks and wildlife refuges, revoking wilderness policies, pushing for more roads on national forests, agitating to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, rolling back the protections of the Endangered Species Act, and pressing for oil and gas production almost everywhere on public lands without regard to environmental values.

President-elect Obama can reaffirm our historic, bipartisan, national commitment to conservation by appointing strong and visionary leaders to head the many agencies throughout government that administer our public lands and waters.

Our country was founded on the immense wealth and strength of its natural resources and ecosystems. It is the duty of our next president to protect our public lands, oceans, and climate so that future generations can also thrive.