

## EDITORIAL

### The New US President and the Environment

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New administrations herald new priorities. It is appropriate, therefore, to examine the environmental issues likely to face President George W. Bush and ask how environmental professionals can relate to the new order in Washington, DC.

The precedents for Mr. Bush are highly varied. Since the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961, every American president has faced important challenges and issues on the environment. Mr. Bush's responses will be central to his hope of gaining the respect of some of those many, many voters who voted for the other side. Had Al Gore won, he would have confronted the same challenge but in reverse from what Mr. Bush faces.

John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson were in office just before the massive deluge of reform legislation on the environment, but they can be remembered for effectively facing up to the first official realization that pesticides were decidedly a mixed blessing. Richard Nixon can be remembered for many things, one of which is that he signed into law most current environmental legislation as well as created the USEPA. Nixon was decidedly the giant on environment during the last half of the century.

Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter were both saddled with difficult energy issues, and neither came out unbruised. Ronald Reagan attempted to reverse many reforms of the Nixon era, but these ignited extensive opposition. George Bush the elder saw the political light and softened the rhetoric of the Reagan years. He was highly cautious, however, and never fully embraced the first

efforts at comprehensive global agreements at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, 1992.

George Bush the younger comes into office after eight years of Bill Clinton and Al Gore (who is probably the only major elected American office holder who ever wrote a best seller on the environment). Clinton and Gore spoke a much more active line on the environment, but the cautiousness of their actions was reminiscent of Bush the elder.

So how will Bush the younger engage the environment? Only time will tell, but several issues are likely to rise to prominence during the next four years. Or, perhaps better said, these are the issues that I *hope* he will consider!

Let's start with examples of the local ones, because they are at the heart of environmental practice. After all, in one way or another, all environmental problems are intensely local and, if they are to be resolved, they must be handled with methods that people will accept in their daily routine.

*Air pollution* is likely to engage the new president. For example, restrictions on particulate matter from diesel engines and acidic emissions of coal-burning utility plants in the Midwest are creating disputes that have pitted industry against environmental health specialists and state against state. Scientific research is documenting that the existing situations are unacceptable and economic trends suggest that, without reform, matters will get worse. Some states, like Ohio, are major sources of air pollution and voted for Mr. Bush; others, like New Jersey and New York, are major recipients of air pollution and voted for Mr. Gore. How Mr. Bush handles these questions may affect his prospects in 2004.

*Water pollution* is also likely to be a major problem for the new administration. Efforts to reduce non-point source pollut-

ants, which gained steam during the Clinton years, are unlikely to go back to sleep under the new team. To put it bluntly, problems like soil erosion and contaminated storm-water run-off have precious little benefit. Not only is topsoil destroyed, so, too, is aquatic habitat with silt and contaminating chemicals. The first weakens and threatens to destroy soil productivity for farms, forests, and suburban areas. Hardly an economic benefit! The latter brings the Clean Water Act into juxtaposition with the Endangered Species Act, for example on farmland run-off and salmon habitat in the Pacific Northwest. Even with a nominally Republican Congress, Mr. Bush may find little peace if he seeks to avoid water quality issues and associated habitat destruction.

*Energy* without doubt will be on the platter for the new administration. As we go to press, California is draining electricity out of the Pacific Northwest, at a time of year in which the power usually flows the other way. Mr. Bush may be inclined to say that the problem is one of supply: just crank up the generators and the problem will be solved. When all is said and done, however, the matter almost certainly will be more complicated. How much can we get from conservation and more efficient use of energy? What is the mix of generation technology the public will tolerate? At what price, in cash and in environmental impacts? What about innovation, for example in wind generation, photovoltaics, and fuel cells? How should the immediate problem of California's electrical energy be placed in the larger context of global climate change and endangered species preservation?

In energy, Mr. Bush has both a handicap and a tremendous advantage: He will be perceived as an advocate for oil and natural gas, which will lead many environmentally inclined to look skeptically at his proposals, whatever they are. Yet that very same background gives him enormous opportunity: If Mr. Bush is led to speak decisively for

conservation and alternatives, he will have a credibility among some that Mr. Gore could never have achieved. If true leadership on energy issues is to emerge in the next few years, it will be because President Bush faced the challenges squarely.

Although environment always has a critical element of local action, some issues also require efforts at the national and international levels. A few examples will illustrate what is at stake here.

**Climate change** is very likely to be the big-ticket item on the international stage. Proponents of reducing greenhouse gas emissions have continued to strengthen their case on scientific grounds during the past eight years. Disagreements on how to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, however, led to an impasse between the United States and the European Union at The Hague in The Netherlands last November. Climate models are not yet perfect (and what models ever are?), and opponents of action on greenhouse gas emissions must not be dismissed out of hand. Nevertheless, human life is dependent upon making decisions based on imperfect information. Nations need to move now toward greenhouse gas reductions.

This movement will require international agreements, and Mr. Bush has an excellent opportunity to lead here. He will need to start with the US Senate, which must be convinced if an international agreement is ever to become the law in the United States. The issue of climate change also ties directly to local concerns about energy. Environmental professionals can assist in educating the public and helping firms and local governments adapt to the changes required to lower emissions of greenhouse gases.

**Preservation of habitat and control of chemical pollution** are a pair of linked is-

sués that also call for broad international actions and, incidentally, a great deal of local action by environmental professionals. No country can regulate its own industry all by itself; the activity will just move into a new country with lower regulatory standards. Only international agreements that set common standards have a reasonable chance of leading to substantial reform.

One example of the dilemmas faced here is found in a forthcoming article in *Environmental Practice* (June 2001) by Stephen Bocking: pollution of wildlife, which is the human food supply in the Arctic, by chemicals manufactured, used, and discarded in the temperate and tropical areas of the globe. Preserving Arctic habitat and human health, in other words, requires control of chemical pollutants by many countries that have no Arctic zones.

We have an excellent model for such common action in the Montreal Protocol, adopted in 1987 and amended several times since then. This Protocol was an international agreement on control of ozone-destroying chemicals that created the famous "hole" over the Antarctic. Despite the successes to date of this international agreement, Mr. Bush will probably face requests to go slow, for example by not regulating methyl bromide soil fumigant under the Clean Air Act as a Class I ozone-destroying chemical. He should resist such pressures.

Yet another example of problems from toxic chemicals centers on increasing evidence that even minute traces of some pollutants have worrisome medical and environmental effects. Probably the most infamous of these chemicals is the ubiquitous "dioxin" (2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin or TCDD), which may have carcinogenic, endocrine disrupting, and teratogenic activities at current levels of background contamination, in humans

and in other species. To be sure, the scientific case is not absolutely certain that pollutants like dioxin are causing illness and death at current levels. Yet weight-of-the-evidence considerations and strong circumstantial evidence increasingly make pleas for "no action/further study" sound like an old wheeze. President Bush and his team may face a realization that even conservatives opposed to government regulation don't really want to see earth's habitat and their own health slowly poisoned.

The President will thus face in general the difficult challenge of bringing all chemical pollutants under better management or, preferably, of finding alternatives that are not so dangerous and destructive. At stake are not only the ozone layer and the polar environments but also many other issues of ecotoxicology and environmental health. People and all other organisms depend upon such reforms for their health, and maybe their lives.

The above list of issues is far from complete, but each is marked by serious scientific work. These may not be the issues Mr. Bush will naturally gravitate towards. What I urge, however, is that the new administration rise to the leadership challenge that is present in every one of these issues. Environmental professionals of every stripe can help by showing local government, corporations, labor, and environmentalists how we as Americans can still live a good life after needed reforms. In fact, our lives will be better, and that is what Mr. Bush says he wants to do. So let the games begin!

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