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MAY 11-ROOM SELECTION



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Bush, Kerry use Earth Day to put focus on environment

Despite the candidates' rhetoric, analysts debate the environment's impact on the presidential race

By Bill Lambrecht
St. Louis Post-Dispatch (KRT)

WASHINGTON — With a woody backdrop in Maine and a promise to preserve wetlands, President George W. Bush worked Thursday to blunt one of the clearest distinctions between presidential candidates this year — their environmental records.

The president and his Democratic challenger, Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, both used Earth Day to make appeals on conservation issues, even though voters may be paying less attention to the environment than in recent election campaigns.

But both Kerry and advocacy groups intend to raise the profile of the environment in the coming months in hopes that voters will begin focusing again on issues other than terrorism, the Iraq war and the economy.

In Missouri, Democratic activists gathered on Kerry's behalf at 12 locations Thursday night in St. Louis, Kansas City, Jefferson City, Springfield and Columbia to talk about environmental issues.

The president, after touring a nature preserve in Wells, Maine, near his family's Kennebunkport compound, declared that his administration would "create, improve and protect" more than 3 million acres of wetlands over the next five years.

"The old policy about wetlands was to limit the loss of wetlands. Today I'm going to announce a new policy, a new goal for our country, instead of just limiting our losses, we will expand the wetlands of America," Bush said.

Bush's new commitment marks a departure from some of his policies during his administration. For instance, the White House has supported several water projects that would damage wetlands, among them the St. Johns Bayou/New Madrid Floodway project in the Missouri Bootheel.

That Mississippi River flood control project would drain at least 18,000 acres of wetlands; it has been

approved by the Army Corps of Engineers and is undergoing final state review.

A recent National Wildlife Federation study calculated that 29 proposed water projects, the Bootheel project among them, threaten 640,000 acres of wetlands and fragile areas near shorelines.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which administers a key government wetlands program, approves the vast majority of requests from developers and others to fill wetlands, according to government figures.

In the future, the president said, that the corps and other federal agencies would restore and create at least 1 million acres of wetlands in five years. Grants to farmers under last year's farm bill will help preserve another 1 million acres toward the goal of 3 million.

In Houston, Kerry called the president's wetlands plan "a smoke and mirrors game ... For the last 3 years this administration, this president, had a proposal that would have lost us 20 million acres of wetlands."

Kerry spoke in the president's home state during a three-day campaign swing in which he has campaigned heavily on environmental issues.

Kerry is a favorite of environmental advocacy groups with a 96 percent League of Conservation approval rating during his 19 years in the Senate. Polls also show that voters continue to give Democrats a higher rating than Republicans on their ability to handle environmental issues.

But environmental issues aren't registering heavily with voters this political season, in part because of the public's focus on war and terrorism, along with general concerns about the economy and jobs.

A Gallup Poll published earlier this month found sharp declines in the president's ratings on environmental and energy issues. On environmental issues, 46 percent of Americans said the president was doing a poor job compared with 41 percent who said he is doing a good job. That finding reflected a 10 percent decline in the president's positive rating.

Bush's positive rating on energy had plummeted from 58 percent to 34 percent since 2001.

Nonetheless, political analysts like

Stuart Rothenberg question how much the environment will matter to voters.

"When times are good and the nation is at peace, people have the time and the inclination to talk about health care, the environment and issues affecting their lives," he said.

Rothenberg observed that environmental issues might work the best for Kerry among certain groups of voters in swing states. "We're talking about political and social moderates, particularly suburban women and people there who are concerned with kids and the quality of their lives," he said.

Karlyn Bowman, an analyst with the conservative American Enterprise Institute, pointed to polls showing that environmental problems rank near the bottom on a broad list of voter concerns.

"I see a lot of evidence in surveys that people are becoming 'light greens.' (Their) commitment is the same, but they're just not willing to do more in terms of environmental activism particularly at the national level," she said.

Deb Callahan, president of the League of Conservation Voters, argued that Kerry can elevate the environment in voters' minds. "In a presidential election, the issues that the presidential candidates talk about are the issues that people think about," she said.

Her organization, along with several others, announced this week that it will try to raise the profile of environmental issues by mobilizing 25,000 volunteers to knock on 1.5 million doors in four swing states — Florida, Wisconsin, New Mexico and Oregon.

Riley Dunlap, a sociologist who studies public opinion on environmental issues, said that the groups have at least a chance to succeed.

"They are going to keep pounding away, and it might be said that Earth Day is their launch. Their efforts, combined with the fact that Kerry is viewed much more favorably than Bush on these issues, raises the possibility that the environment could be a moderately significant issue in November, more than most people think right now," he said.

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