

ENVIROS EYEBALL BUSH

Green campaign to focus on Bush's anti- environmental record.

By Ben Geman

The environmental movement has spent three years playing defense against a president they call the most anti-environment in history. Now they want payback, and hope to pull off a notoriously tough task: making green issues a big deal in a national race.

Already, the environment has become an issue in the Democratic contest, though not always in the way environmentalists would hope. Sen. John Kerry's (D-Mass.) campaign recently circulated literature that misleadingly claims Howard Dean compiled a poor environmental record as Vermont governor.

But looking beyond the primaries, there are signs that green issues could play an important role this year, when the environmental differences between the eventual nominee and Bush will be massive compared to any between the Democrats themselves. Enviro say their 2004 campaign will be bigger and, more important, better than past cycles, and strategists believe the White House's dismantling of environmental protections leaves Bush vulnerable to attack.

At the same time, major candidates are issuing substantive environment and energy platforms that contrast starkly with the Bush record, which keeps getting more controversial. Last month, EPA offered what environmentalists call a weak plan to curb power plant mercury emissions that won't provide very steep reductions for 15 years — the latest in what activists call a string of rollbacks that include easing oil and gas

drilling restrictions on public lands, all but ignoring global warming emissions, and underfunding toxic waste cleanups, to name a few.

"You have a stark difference and a concrete record," says Aimee Christensen, a former Clinton administration energy official and now executive director of Environment 2004. The group, which includes former EPA head Carol Browner and several other Clinton-era environment officials, is raising money to publicize green issues in swing states this year. "If we are ef-



Photo of logged-over Huckleberry land swap by Roy Keene, courtesy Native Forest Council, www.forestcouncil.org



fective in communicating our message, it [the environment] can make a much bigger difference than it has in the past," she says.

But it's a big "if." The environment is a famously second-tier issue in national elections — voters favor strong protections when asked about the environment directly, yet it's often far down the list when pollsters ask voters what their top concerns are.

As a result, the environmental movement is linking its message to issues with more immediacy. Green groups — and, so far, the major Democratic candidates — are increasingly connecting the environment to

voters' core concerns about jobs, health and security. Environmentalists and candidates alike point out, for instance, that building a renewable energy infrastructure will create scores of good jobs and help wean the country off foreign oil. "It's not just getting the environmental vote, it's getting the swing vote. It's talking about public health and jobs," says Christensen.

The idea of linking the environment to issues that resonate more in presidential races is not entirely new. But the message will be more fully realized than in the past, in part because 2000 was an imperfect vehicle for the green movement and the Democrats as some enviros backed Ralph Nader. At the same time, Bush hadn't yet compiled the record that activists now believe is such a good target.

The environment will also surface as part of a larger critique of the Bush administration that goes something like this: The White House's cozy relationship with corporate contributors in the energy sector and elsewhere is placing big industries' interests — in health policy, environmental rollbacks, tax policy and everything else — ahead of the public's.

Democratic pollster Michael Bocian says the environment will be among a set of issues where Democrats can argue that "President Bush sides with his corporate friends instead of regular folks." Bocian's firm, headed by former Clinton pollster Stan Greenberg, said in a memo last year that tying Bush green policy to the president's corporate base is effective.



Keeping an Eye on Bush

A new website was launched in December focusing exclusively on the Bush administration's environmental and public health agenda. The site is at www.BushGreenwatch.org and has daily updates on White House actions, reactions and contradictions.

A recent story on the website documents how the Environmental Protection Agency is weakening restrictions on mercury pollution at the same time as the Food & Drug Administration is announcing plans to warn women and children to limit consumption of canned tuna because of high levels of mercury. The full text of Al Gore's speech blasting Bush's environmental record ran last week on the site.

The site, supported by MoveOn.org and Environmental Media Services, is searchable by topic and offers a free five-day-a-week mailing list. — TJT