

TOXIC STRINGS ATTACHED

Why the health care debate should consider the environment BY KERA ABRAHAM

The needs for clean air, water and soil are nonpartisan. But the two leading candidates for U.S. president have starkly different track records when it comes to their support of legislation that affects our natural resources. The League of Conservation Voters (LCV) gave John Kerry an 'A' grade for his lifetime environmental voting record, while George W. Bush earned the first-ever failing grade on an LCV presidential report card.

"The Bush administration has gone backwards on the bipartisan environmental progress that has gone on in the past 30 years," says LCV spokesman Mark Sokolove.

Despite these differences, the environment has taken a back seat in the presidential race, possibly because Americans don't view it as something that effects their daily lives. "When people think of the environment as an electoral issue, they think of birds and bunnies and mountains," says Aimée Christensen, executive director of Environment 2004, a PAC opposing George W. Bush on the grounds of his environmental policies.

Rather than being of peripheral concern, says Christensen, the quality of our environment is intrinsically connected to something everyone cares about. "When Bush undermines environmental protections," she says, "he is actually undermining public health."

LIES ON CLEAR SKIES

During the second presidential debate on Oct. 8, Bush said, "The quality of the air's cleaner since I've been the president." But the EPA reports that American cities exceeded clean air standards 33 percent more often, and almost 20 million more Americans breathed smoggy air, in 2002 than in 2000.

Bush claims that his Clear Skies Initiative cuts emissions of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and mercury — all of which are known human health hazards — by 70 percent. But the LCV claims that the opposite is true; the initiative actually allows industries to emit more sulfur dioxide, smog-forming nitrogen oxides and mercury than current law. The Clear Skies Initiative also reclassifies carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases as nonpollutants, a move that prompted Oregon and Washington to sue the Bush administration.

"If you just left the Clean Air Act all alone the way it is today, no change, the air would be cleaner than it is if you pass the Clear Skies Act," said John Kerry in response to Bush's claims during the second presidential debate. "We're going backwards."

In Nov. 2002, the Bush administration weakened a Clean Air Act provision that requires old power plants to upgrade their pollution control technology when they expand or renovate their operations. The decision may affect the lungs of more than 12,600 children in Oregon who live within 30 miles of a coal power plant, according to LCV estimates.

"Bush's policies regarding clean air in general have been abominable. They actually allow more pollution in the air and don't clean up the skies," says Sokolove. "Air pollution is a leading contributor to asthma and other respiratory problems, particularly in children. It drives up health care costs."

Sokolove says that one of Bush's most dangerous air-pollution policies regards mercury, a highly poisonous neurotoxin linked with autism, Alzheimer's disease and birth defects. The third-biggest source of mercury exposure for Americans, after dental fillings and vaccines, is seafood contaminated by emissions from coal-burning power plants.

ry emissions by 90 percent by 2008 — a simple task that can be accomplished by installing available pollution control technology. But instead of enforcing the new mercury restrictions, the Bush administration modified the Clean Air Act to allow three times more mercury to be released into the air for at least 10 years longer.

"Mercury is a poison. We think it's an outrage that this issue has not taken more priority in the presidential election," says Christensen. "When Bush does not seek reductions of the greatest hazardous substances, he does so at the expense of national security."

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MARK SOKOLOVE, LCV SPOKESMAN



For more information on the Bush administration's environmental policies, visit these websites.

Sierra Club's "W. Watch:" www.sierraclub.org/wwatch

Bush Greenwatch: www.bushgreenwatch.org

League of Conservation Voters: www.lcv.org

EnviroVictory 2004 Oregon: www.envirovictory.org/?id=9

Environment 2004: www.environment2004.org

Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov

In a recent EPA study of 260 lakes across the nation, 100 percent of fish sampled were contaminated with mercury. One in six American women of childbearing age now harbors enough mercury in her body to put her children at risk of developmental problems.

When Bush assumed the presidency in 2000, the Clinton administration was poised to define mercury as a hazardous pollutant under the Clean Air Act. This would have required coal-fired utilities to reduce mercur-

GUTTING CLEAN WATER LAWS

The 30-year-old Clean Water Act authorizes the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to regulate industrial discharge into American waterways. But even though the act led to more stringent controls on water pollution, by 2000 about 45 percent of America's waterways were too polluted for drinking, fishing or swimming, according to an EPA report. Almost one-fourth of all lakes and river miles in Oregon have impaired water quality.

Instead of strengthening the Clean Water Act to improve the safety of our water, the Bush administration did the opposite. In January 2003, Bush's EPA appointees proposed changes to the Clean Water Act that would make it only applicable to "navigable" waters, removing protections for up to 60 percent of America's streams and 20 million acres of wetlands. Public and Congressional outcry led the administration to drop the proposal, but the EPA still follows instructions to seek permission from D.C. before enforcing water protections for seasonal streams and wetlands.

The Bush administration has not been shy about other policies that pollute the nation's fresh water supply. On Bush's first day in office, his administration weakened regulations against sewage overflows from factory farms, one of the biggest health threats to municipal water supplies. In 2001, Vice-President Dick Cheney's secret energy task force drafted a provision that allows gasoline producers off the hook for cleaning up the gasoline additive MTBE, a chemical that makes groundwater undrinkable even at trace levels. And when the EPA tried to impose a new standard on drinking water to decrease acceptable levels of a highly toxic rocket fuel additive called perchlorate, which has been found in nearly all of the nation's winter lettuce, the Bush administration delayed action by ordering a 15-month review of the proposal. New rules imposed by Bush appointees allow mining operations to dump mine wastes — even entire mountaintops — directly into streams and rivers. The list goes on.

All of these actions lead toward more polluted American waterways, with untold consequences for public health. "The terrorist attacks on 9/11 killed 3,000 people," says Eugene environmentalist James Johnston, "but 3,000 people per month are going to die from the crud that the EPA is allowing industry to put in our water."

HAZARDS NEAR HOME

In 1980, Congress passed legislation to remediate the nation's most hazardous dumps. The law, founded on the "polluter pays" principle, requires industries to pay fees into a trust account called Superfund to clean up toxic waste sites.

President Reagan signed Superfund into law and President George H.W. Bush reauthorized it. But in 1995, Congress failed to renew the corporate taxes that finance Superfund, shifting the burden to taxpayers. And George W. Bush's administration is the first to reject the "polluter pays" principle outright. A July 2003 report from the General Accounting Office details how the Superfund Trust Fund dwindled from more than \$2 billion in 1995 to bankruptcy in September 2003. In 2004, taxpayers financed almost 80 percent of Superfund; in 2005, taxpayers will foot almost 100 percent of the bill.

As a result, only half as many Superfund cleanups have been completed during