U. S. Environmental Protection Agency
Blog Round-up
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ROUND-UP MAJOR BLOGS

BP SPILL

Good-bye, Polar Bears, Hello, Oil-drenched Pelicans: How the Gulf Spill is Changing the Environmental Movement (*Treehugger*)

Climate change was always a tough sell. But as an important article by Jason Zengerie in New York Magazine points out, it mostly seems to happen in another place, and another time. He quotes a pollster: "People overwhelmingly say melting ice is a very bad thing. The problem is that hardly any Americans live next to a melting glacier." As can be seen by Brian's post yesterday on the consensus among scientists on climate change, nothing will convince the sceptics. Jason Zengerie blames Al Gore; he made climate change political. But the gulf oil spill: almost everybody gets that.

Andy Revkin is quoted about the difficulty in convincing people about the problems of climate change.

"I could spend the next twenty years trying to write really good stories about climate, the way I've spent the last twenty years doing that, but I lost the sense that that was a route to efficacy. If the social-psychology research shows people don't change their stances on these issues based on new information, and I'm in the information business, then what the hell am I doing?"

The article of full of nuggets. On why people spend money on solar panels instead of insulation, doing the visible if less effective and expensive thing:

"One reason the Prius has been so successful is because it's distinctive-looking," says [Keith] Goodman. "Prius owners brand themselves with it. But when you look at other things you can do, like get your home weatherized, that's totally invisible. All those peer and social effects don't happen."

Bill McKibben thinks that the oil spill may be the kick needed to finally get the climate movement out of its stupor.

In 1969, the Santa Barbara oil spill and the burning Cuyahoga River helped give birth to the first Earth Day, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Clean Air Act; in 1979, the Three Mile Island accident gave a dramatic boost to the anti-nuclear movement. "One hopes that what's happening in the gulf will have some of the same kind of effect," McKibben says. "This has the potential to be a galvanizing moment for the climate movement."

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Posted: June 23, 2010 02:20 PM

Making the Health and Safety of Gulf Coast Residents and Responders a Top Priority (*Huffington Post*)

In her post on June 18, Representative Carolyn Maloney pointed out an important lesson of disaster response: protecting the health of responders must be just as high a priority as reacting to the disaster itself.

The U.S. Government is doing everything we can to ensure the health and safety of the response workers and residents on the Gulf Coast. And we're working with state and local governments to make sure that our monitoring and response efforts are comprehensive, effective, and based on the best science.

Here's an overview of what we're doing.

In the Gulf area today, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are monitoring the air over water and land to detect potentially harmful levels of the chemicals associated with both oil and dispersants. But air monitoring represents only one way of determining if the health of responders or residents is threatened. That's why we're also conducting surveillance of health complaints and medical evaluation of symptoms and illnesses.

Every day, CDC is monitoring health symptoms, injuries, and illnesses that could be related to oil response work and ensuring that those reports are being evaluated by safety and health professionals, not just by BP. CDC is also going to conduct systematic reviews of health data to make sure we're doing everything we can to prevent harm. Already, CDC is conducting health surveillance at 60 poison control centers and 86 health care facilities, and is using data from the Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi state health departments to make sure workers and residents are safe.

To date, CDC's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has also administered surveys to 15,000 workers so that we can compile a roster of individuals involved in the response. An accurate record of who's participating in the response is vital to establishing any links between health and work exposures. Through its Health Hazard Evaluation Program, NIOSH is also assessing exposures among responders working on vessels at the source of the spill and those involved in burning, booming, skimming, shoreline cleanup, wildlife cleaning, and waste oil management.

Our surveillance and health evaluation efforts are based on our expertise in disaster response. But as any scientist will tell you, any major disaster presents unique challenges. That's why Secretary Sebelius has asked the Institute of Medicine to convene outside experts and help determine the most effective methods for protecting responders and residents. I am here at the Institute of Medicine Workshop being held in New Orleans -- and we're looking forward to the findings from the two-day meeting.

We know that in many ways this work is just beginning. But we also know this: the health and safety of Gulf Coast residents and responders must remain a top priority throughout the recovery effort. Working with health professionals, scientists, and our partners from across government, we're going to make sure that happens.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Obama Vows To Go Where No Man Has Gone Before: Passing and Signing Climate and Energy Legislation (*Grist*)

by Keith Schneider
23 Jun 2010 4:23 PM
Given the emotional reserve of a man whose aides once referred to as “no drama Obama,” the president is getting pretty fired up about energy. On Wednesday President Obama concluded an all hands cabinet meeting at the White House by publicly declaring again his resolve to develop a “new energy strategy that the American people desperately want.”

“It is time for us to move to a clean energy future,” the president said, adding that “the entire cabinet here recognizes, with all the other stuff that they’re doing, that if we get energy right, an awful lot of things can happen as a consequence.”

The unscripted outburst came eight days after the president delivered a formal Oval Office summons for a “national mission” to pursue cleaner sources of energy and new practices that limited carbon emissions. The president’s “national mission” speech, in turn, followed five days after he alerted a bipartisan group of lawmakers and prominent business leaders that he wanted to “move much more aggressively on the energy agenda,”and three weeks after Obama told an audience in Pittsburgh that “the time has come, once and for all, for this nation to fully embrace a clean energy future.”

Not since President Jimmy Carter delivered his famous and perceptive April 1977 address, during which he asserted that solving the energy crisis was the “moral equivalent of war,” has an American leader staked so much political credibility on a new national energy policy. And as energy historians are quick to note, none of President

Obama's successors, starting with President Nixon, achieved anything close to the alternative energy goals they pursued.

Will It Work Now?

The obvious question is whether economic, environmental, and social conditions are sufficiently different today than they were in any of the last four decades, and whether the country is experiencing enough urgency to seriously reckon with how it produces and uses energy.

There are no ready responses. The president's critics in the energy industry and the Republican party have expressed hostility to Obama's call to action and have promised an aggressive counterattack. Some allies in the president's party and the national media wonder if the White House and the nation have sufficient fortitude to accomplish such a significant adjustment in the country's economic and environmental vector.

For his part, the president has vowed to "find the necessary votes" to pass a strong bill. And environmental advocates who've worked for decades to make the case for clean energy and climate action are pressing the Senate and White House to make sure the bill is comprehensive and includes credible measures to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases.

In a capital city devoted to process as much as to politics, the gears of legislative action are grinding to life. The summer of 2010 is shaping up to be a new season for clean energy and climate action, a season that until April 20 was not at all clear would occur at all.

BP Disaster's Legacy?

That day, of course, the Deepwater Horizon exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 men. The blowout turned loose over 100 million gallons of raw crude with no end in sight.

President Obama understands the spill has pitched the country toward a new reckoning with its devotion to oil. That involves carefully evaluating the deadening costs of a marine ecosystem deluged by oil, and the recklessness of heating the atmosphere with uncontrolled carbon. It also requires coming to grips with an economy distorted by the $400 billion-a-year price for imports that threaten U.S. security, as well as the essential values of choice and mobility that Americans find harder and harder to attain.

It's for these reasons that President Obama is embracing the moment, and he's apparently convinced Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to join him in what both hope will be a steady push to pass comprehensive legislation in the Senate before the August recess. A year ago, the House passed its version of an energy and climate bill that awaits a Congressional conference committee.

The Senate isn't starting from scratch. Senator Reid and the president have asked lawmakers to choose elements of three proposals, draw up new provisions to respond

to disaster in the Gulf, and introduce a new bill in mid-July. The three existing Senate proposals:

n In December 2009 Senators Maria Cantwell, a Democrat of Washington and Susan Collins, a Republican of Maine, introduced the Carbon Limits and Energy for American Renewal (CLEAR) Act which would set up a program for cutting carbon emissions by selling “carbon shares” to fuel producers. Most of the resulting revenue would generate checks to every American to compensate for what the co-authors predict will be higher energy prices. The proposal has attracted considerable support from environmental organizations, including 350.org, a global climate advocacy organization.

n In May 2010 Senators John Kerry, a Democrat of Massachusetts, and Joe Lieberman, an Independent of Connecticut, introduced the American Power Act, which seeks to cut carbon emissions, finance new clean energy and transit programs, and provides considerable financial and regulatory support to develop new oil and gas resources offshore, coal reserves, and nuclear power. Environmental organizations expressed support and said they would to fix provisions they didn’t like. Republicans said they would work to defeat the measure.

n In June 2010 Senator Richard Lugar, Republican of Indiana, introduced his Practical Energy and Climate Plan that proposes to increase vehicle fuel efficiency, develop cleaner fuels, increase energy efficiency in buildings, encourage more diversity in energy supply including more nuclear energy, and require the government to enhance its ability to monitor and report the effect of the program on greenhouse gas emissions.

Of late, political reporters are focusing on whether the president will take point or follow Senator Reid’s lead in shepherding a bill through the Senate, duplicating the president’s strategy during the bruising health care battle.

But that frame on an otherwise completely compelling political narrative is merely an exercise in Washington gamesmanship. In this instance, regardless of where the president situates himself, there is no mistaking where the urgency of the legislative initiative lies - in the BP Gulf disaster - and who’s driving hard to change the rules of the energy game - the president.

No Surprise, But A Big Blunder

Though the timing is almost serendipitous, nobody paying close attention to the president’s principles and values should be surprised. From the moment he announced his candidacy for president in February 2007, the president has set very clear clean energy and climate goals in order to “be the generation that finally frees America from the tyranny of oil.”

For climate and clean energy advocates, that’s an interesting statement from a president who blundered into a March 31 announcement to expand the offshore territory suitable for new oil and gas exploration, calling it safe.

The president, though, has pushed the country closer — albeit not nearly close enough — to a clean energy economy, and taken more climate action than any American leader. The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act included over $100 billion in public investment for clean energy, energy efficiency, and transit. The administration, under the authority of the Clean Air Act, has established significantly higher fuel efficiency standards for cars and light trucks, and stricter emissions standards for greenhouse gases that go into effect in 2012 and will save 1.8 billion barrels of oil and eliminate 900 million tons of carbon emissions in its first five years, according to the E.P.A.

The White House also is pursuing new regulations to limit mountaintop mining for coal, reduce the hazards of coal ash piles, increase energy efficiency in buildings, and promote cleaner and greener cities.

A comprehensive climate and energy bill that includes enforceable limits on carbon emissions is the single most important legislative tool to, in the president's words, "turn this crisis of global warming into a moment of opportunity for innovation, and job creation, and an incentive for businesses that will serve as a model for the world." President Obama vows to get it done. The majority of Americans, judging from public opinion polls, understand the gravity of the moment and support where Obama wants to go.

– Keith Schneider

GENERAL

Posted: June 24, 2010 09:32 AM

A Mistrusted, Incompetent Federal Government Cannot Build a Green Economy (*Huffington Post*)

Green Economy , Gulf Oil Spill , Sustainability , Green News
In a recent NY Times- CBS News poll, Americans were asked: "How likely do you think it is that within the next 25 years the United States will develop an alternative to oil as our major source of energy?" About 59% said it was very or somewhat likely, and 26% thought it was not too likely or not at all likely to take place. Despite this optimism about technology, most of those polled (65%) opposed a dollar-a-gallon increase in gas taxes to pay for renewable energy development. Apparently the public assumes that business can make this transition without government. That is a risky assumption.

People know that the fossil fuel era is coming to an end, but they are not confident that government has the capacity to manage the transition. They do not think that research and development (R & D) can be stimulated by government, and they probably don't believe that a designated tax would actually be spent on this new technology.

Americans' confidence in government and big institutions is at a low point. In our anti-institution political culture, the only time in recent years that we have seen much support for the federal government was in the aftermath of the 9-11 crisis.

There has been a long term decline in trust in government since the Johnson Administration in the mid-1960s. A recent report by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reports the results of the question: "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" When John F. Kennedy was President, over 75% of the public answered that they trusted the government. In the early days of the Johnson Administration it peaked at about 78% and then declined steadily though the Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter years to a low of about 27%. During the Reagan and Bush administrations we saw a recovery into the mid 40's. During the start of the Clinton administration, only 20% of the public expressed any trust in government. This rose gradually back into the mid 40's by the time he left office. At the start of George W. Bush's term in office, trust in government rose above 50% for the first time in a generation, only to decline into the low 20's as President Obama entered office.

There was a brief window after 9-11 when trust in government returned, but the Bush administration was unable to build on those positive, crisis-induced emotions. The Obama Administration has been unable to increase people's trust in government. The Pew study, conducted in March of this year, also focused on trust in several specific government agencies and compared 2010 data with data collected in 1997-1998. According to Pew:

"While job ratings for the Obama administration are mostly negative, they are much more positive than the ratings for Congress; 40% say the administration does an excellent or good job while just 17% say the same about Congress. Federal agencies and institutions also are viewed much more positively than is Congress. Nonetheless, favorable ratings have fallen significantly since 1997-1998 for seven of 13 federal agencies included in the survey."

Favorable ratings fell from:

61% to 40% in the Department of Education
75% to 58% in the Food and Drug Administration
69% to 57% in the Environmental Protection Agency
76% to 67% in the Department of Defense

Only the always unpopular Internal Revenue Service (IRS) seemed to have improved over the past decade with its approval rising from 38% in 1997-1998 to 47% in 2010.

Why does this matter? It matters because as BP is teaching us every day in the Gulf of Mexico, business alone cannot assure sustainability. Of course, neither can government. It takes both. However, the public does not see government as capable

and is not willing to raise taxes to invest in government energy programs. The public doesn't trust government institutions and has an increasingly negative view of federal agencies.

Only government is capable of undertaking the long-term scientific research needed to develop the technologies we need to develop a green economy. The private sector is best suited to applying this new knowledge to the production of more sustainable commercial services and products. The private sector, however, is not able to invest enough money to generate all of the fundamental scientific breakthroughs we need. That is the job of federal labs and government-sponsored, university-based research. If the American government is not seen as capable of funding or conducting this basic research, this work will not get done. Or at least it won't get done here. China, Europe and the Arab Emirates might develop such research capacity, but they have a long way to go to catch up with the American scientific research establishment.

As I read the polling data and see the attitude of the American public toward the federal government, I might wince, but as much as I hate to say it, the public's lack of trust in government is a reasonable response to the job done by the federal government over the past several decades. Government has taken on missions beyond its capacity, and since the Reagan Administration, has often allowed ideology to replace best management practices. The government that during World War II mobilized a peace-time nation in 18 months, attracted the best and brightest to the New Frontier of JFK, landed men on the moon in less than a decade, and at one time, even reduced the poverty rate to 10%, now can't even evacuate a city after a hurricane or plug a leaking oil well in the Gulf of Mexico.

For the American federal government to be trusted again, it must become trustworthy. It must develop policies that aren't owned and operated by special interests, and it must develop modern, agile, capable agencies. Developing a green economy requires government action. Before the federal government can take action, it must earn the public's trust. Before it can earn the public's trust, the federal government must increase its competence and organizational capacity.

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