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counterpunch

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Obama and the Environment

The Politics of Bait-and-Switch

By JEFFREY ST. CLAIR and JOSHUA FRANK

After little more than 100 days in office, the Democrats, under the leadership of Barack Obama, have unleashed a slew of anti-environmental policies that would have enraged any reasonable conservationist during the Bush years.

Take the delisting of the gray wolf in the Western Great Lakes and parts of the Northern Rockies, which was announced during the waning days of the Bush era and upheld by Obama earlier this spring. About 200 packs of wolves live in the northern Rocky Mountains today. But only 95 of these packs are led by a breeding pair of wolves, which is significantly less than half of what most biologists consider to be a healthy number in order to fend off imminent decline and long-term genetic problems for the species.

In Idaho, free roaming wolves have been radio-collared, allowing their human killers to track and gun them down by helicopter. Freed from the protections of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the state plans on permitting hundreds of these wolves to be murdered this coming winter. Only a few environmental groups have stepped up in the wolf's defense, with the Center for Biological Diversity based in Tucson, Arizona leading the charge.

It's not just the wolf that's been hung out to dry. Shortly after Obama's inauguration, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Commerce Secretary Gary Locke announced they were revoking an 11th hour Bush directive that weakened the ESA listing process. However, shortly thereafter the Dept. of the Interior refused to repeal a special rule that would have granted the polar bear protection from the impacts of global warming. Salazar said his agency does not believe the law was intended to address climate change, even though many policy analysts believe the ESA could be used to limit the issuing of permits for development projects that would potentially threaten the polar bear by emitting additional greenhouse gases.

"The Endangered Species Act is not the proper tool to deal with a global issue - global warming," Salazar said. "We need to move forward with a comprehensive climate change and energy plan we can be proud of."

Apparently federal protection should not be granted if the industry's emissions happen outside the polar bear's natural habitat. The Obama administration, under Salazar's watch, is refusing to lead

the way in protecting the bear's dwindling populations. Of course the oil and gas cartels were unabashedly pleased with the decision. So much for thinking globally and acting locally.

"We welcome the administration's decision because we, like Secretary Ken Salazar, recognize that the Endangered Species Act is not the proper mechanism for controlling our nation's carbon emissions," said American Petroleum Institute President Jack Gerard. "Instead, we need a comprehensive, integrated energy and climate strategy to address this complex, global challenge."

That's not the only recent victory for big oil provided by Salazar's office. During one of the most ridiculous episodes of the 2008 presidential campaign, the strange tag-team of John McCain and Sarah Palin led their diminutive crowds in spasms of "Drill, baby, drill." Off-shore oil drilling and a new generation of nuclear power plants represented the sum total of the McCain/Palin energy plan.

Though it seemed like political comedy at the time, this strategy has now been at least partially embraced by the Obama administration. As the clock approached midnight on the final eve of the Bush administration, his Interior Department put forward a rule opening 300 million acres of coastal waters to oil drilling. According to the hastily prepared decree, the leasing was to begin by March 23. Enter Salazar with a maneuver that is typical of the Obama approach to environmental politics. Instead of killing the drilling plan outright, Salazar merely extended the analysis period for an additional six months. The environmental lobby was given a procedural crumb, while the oil hounds still had its long-sought prize on the table for the taking.

Although off-shore drilling is so intensely unpopular in coastal states that even Jeb Bush stood up to his brother's attempts to expand drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, Ken Salazar, accompanied by a consort of oil lobbyists, held four town hall forums this spring on off-shore drilling and left that distinct impression that he was leaning toward what he called a "comprehensive approach" to energy development, in which the oceans will be mined for off-shore wind, wave power and, yes, oil. This is proving to be an administration that doesn't know the meaning of the word "no".

Down in Appalachia things are not much better, where the coal extraction industry was recently given the green light to proceed with 42 of its 48 pending mountaintop removal permits. While Obama speaks out about the negative impact of the aptly named mountaintop removal, where whole mountains are blown apart to expose thin lines of coal, he is not willing to take on an industry that continually pollutes rivers and threatens public health.

"If you still have an Obama sticker on your car, maybe think about scraping it off and sending it to the White House with your objections," says Mike Roselle of Climate Ground Zero, who is working hard to stop mountaintop removal in West Virginia and elsewhere. "Blowing mountains to pieces is a crime."

When it comes to CO2 emissions, the EPA has also been more bark than bite. While admitting that greenhouse gases are a threat to human health, the agency will not necessarily move to regulate industry emissions.

White House climate czar Carol Browner and EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson initially said that such a declaration would "indeed trigger the beginning of regulation of CO2," but only weeks later Jackson reversed her belief that industry would be affected by the White House's admission. Speaking before the U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, Jackson said on May 12: "The endangerment finding is a scientific finding mandated by law ... It does not mean regulation."

In fact instead of implementing real regulatory oversight to combat the alleged culprits of global warming, the Obama administration has held its campaign promise to tackle CO2 emissions by embracing free market environmentalism, i.e. cap-and-trade. Obama proposes reducing US emissions 83% by 2050 by essentially allowing industry to regulate itself by putting a price on carbon. But many say there is a reason industry isn't frightened.

"[Cap-and-trade] programs have so many leaks, trap doors, and perverse side effects that they'll probably do more harm than good," says Ted Nace director of CoalSwarm, an environmental project of the Earth Island Institute that seeks to shut down the existing coal plants in the US.

"The illusion that a solution is in place will then prevent simpler, more focused solutions from being implemented. An example of this phenomenon is the sulfur trading system. Proponents of cap-and-trade point to it as proof that pollution markets work, but decades after the program went into place I can show you a big database of coal plants that continue to spew inordinate amounts of sulfur dioxide," says Nace. "A simpler solution to the global warming problem would be to mandate that all the existing coal plants be phased in an orderly, phased manner."

Not surprisingly, Obama refuses to consider strict regulation let alone a carbon tax to address the country's big CO2 emitters. Instead, after intense pressure from the pollution lobby, Obama's approach to attacking with climate change has been whittled down to nothing more than weak market-driven economics that can too easily be manipulated politically. Polluters will be let off the hook as they can simply relocate or build new infrastructure in places where there are few or no carbon regulations.

But by far the boldest stroke of this spring was Obama's courageous decision to zero out funding for the planned nuclear waste repository at the sacred Yucca Mountain. This vault on earthquake prone lands of the Western Shoshone near Las Vegas was long meant to be the escape hatch for the nuclear industry's most aggravating problem: where to hide the accumulating piles of radioactive material from the nation's 104 commercial nuclear reactors. Sen. Harry Reid says Yucca Mountain is dead. So does Energy Secretary Stephen Chu. But Yucca Mountain has been buried before only to rise up from the grave. If indeed Obama has succeeded in killing it off, this alone will eclipse all of the vaporous achievements of the Clinton era.

Still, appraisal of the true meaning of the Yucca Mountain decision must be countered by the administration's ongoing promotion of nuclear power as corrective to climate change. Both Chu and Obama's chief science advisor John Holdren are pushing for federal subsidies for a new generation of nuclear power plants -- even though Obama has admitted there's no safe place to store nuclear waste. Even more disturbing, Holdren continues to hawk the fool's gold of the nuclear lobby: fusion energy.

In a recent interview with *Science*, Holdren said: "We need to develop and deploy approaches to nuclear energy that can minimize the liabilities that have inhibited expansion of that carbon-free energy source up until now. We need to see if we can make fusion work. This is a quest in which I've been engaged since 1965. Again, I started [my work at MIT] in that domain. At that time, people thought fusion was 15 years away. Now people think it's 40 or 50 years away. We need to shrink that time scale again by increasing the investment for making that domain."

This means billions more for the nuclear lobby under the guise of research and development, the pipeline of federal subsidies that has kept the industry alive since Three Mile Island.

Then just last week Obama announced a sweeping overhaul of the car fuel efficiency (CAFE) and exhaust emissions standards, which have languished unmodified for more than a decade. These long-overdue upgrades will force car-makers (if there are any left five years from now when the rules are slated to finally kick in) to curb carbon dioxide emissions by 35 percent and hike fuel

efficiency standards from 30 to 35 miles per gallon. While the proposal has been hailed as historic, it has plenty of drawbacks.

For starters, the plan capitulated to automakers by endorsing a national emissions standard, which will likely preempt states, such as California, from adopting even more stringent clean air rules. Obama also gave the auto industry a few more years to come into compliance with these rather modest requirements. No wonder the move was hailed by traditional Motor City defenders such as Sen. Carl Levin and Rep. John Dingell.

Less endearing is the Obama administration's relentless push to replace oil with biofuels, which will push marginal agriculture lands into production of genetically-engineered and pesticide saturated monocrops, scalping topsoil and draining dwindling water supplies across the Great Plains and Midwest. Overseeing this misguided scheme is Obama's Ag Secretary Tom Vilsack, the former governor of Iowa who has long been a servant of industrial agriculture and the bioengineering industry.

Under Vilsack, the biofuels project is poised to move far beyond burning corn and soybeans for fuel. They want to chop down national forests and burn the public's trees inside a new generation of biomass power generators. This insidious and little noticed program will be marshaled by biomass booster Homer Lee Wilkes, a little known urban planner from Madison, Mississippi. Wilkes was Vilsack's surprise pick for the powerful slot of Undersecretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and the Environment, a position which among other responsibilities places Wilkes in control of the U.S. Forest Service.

So look for to a new wave of timber sales on federal lands, sanctified in the name of fighting climate change, categorically excluded from full environmental analysis and enthusiastically supported by so-called collaborative groups who will be first in line to cash in on the lucrative logging contracts. Coming soon to a national forest near you for a return engagement: greens with chainsaws.

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