

Will Obama deliver on a green agenda?

Wed, 03/12/2008 - 17:00

George W Bush is spending his last days in office forcing through a scorched earth policy on environmental legislation, while also handing his big business backers profitable contracts.

He is hurriedly signing new regulations that will:

? allow commercial oil shale operations on up to two million acres of public lands in Colorado, Utah and Wyoming;

? allow federal agencies to grant approval to new mining, drilling and construction projects without undertaking a full scientific assessment of the impact on local wildlife through changes to the Endangered Species Act; and

? make changes to the rules that limit pollution controls on new fossil fuel power stations and exempting many large-scale agricultural livestock operations from the Clean Water Act.

People across the globe have laid their hopes for the future at the feet of the president-elect to reverse these destructive actions and go much further, to get not just the US but the whole world out of an impending environmental crisis.

Barack Obama is no stranger to the debates around the environment and climate change. As one of the main pillars of his election campaign, he and his running mate Joe Biden developed an environmental manifesto, "Promoting a Healthy Environment". It addressed the desire of American voters for positive action on the environment, relief from the sky-rocketing gas prices, and for the US to no longer be regarded as the pariah that refuses to sign up to the Kyoto Agreement.

In October 2007, Obama said: "We cannot afford more of the same timid politics when the future of our planet is at stake. Global warming is not a someday problem, it is now... The polar ice caps are now melting faster than science had ever predicted? . And if we act now and we act boldly, it doesn't have to be."

But, in reality, what do his plans for a greener century add up to?

While Obama talks about re-engaging with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), at the same time he is promoting a "use it or lose it" approach to existing US oil leases. Oil companies that are not drilling on open areas will be forced to turn them over to other companies who will. Obama is not shifting away from burning fossil fuels, or from expanding the profitable petroleum industry; he simply wants the US to be less dependent on foreign oil.

On the one hand he talks about a one-off emergency windfall rebate, calling on the energy companies that have seen record-breaking profits to provide direct relief to help families coping with the massive price increases in fuel. On the other hand, he doesn't mention increasing corporate taxes across the board to

pay for the investment in public works, such as housing and public transport, that would be needed to make any real difference in energy consumption. This would certainly be needed to follow through on his other policies on clean water and air, healthier communities and preserving land.

Obama talks about a workfare programme for the most vulnerable in society war veterans and disadvantaged youths five million new jobs in a "green economy". He talks about re-tooling the US car industry to become world leaders in plug-in hybrid cars with investments of around \$4 billion. He also promised to ensure that 10 per cent of electricity comes from renewable energy sources in 2012 and 25 per cent by 2025 and to reduce carbon emissions 80 per cent by 2050.

Yet the new President proposes to do all of this by investing a measly \$150 billion over 10 years. Compared to the \$1.7 trillion that the US government, including Obama, voted to hand over to the banks to bail them out of a financial crisis of their own making, \$15 billion per year on changing the entire course of American industry seems totally insufficient to the scale of the task.

Obama still relies on the market for the answer to the environmental problems. The two ways he proposes to raise the money to fund green change is through the implementation of a market based cap-and-trade system. To fill the gap in US technology development, he proposes a clean technologies venture capital fund.

As the global markets crash down around us, a reliance on these capitalist schemes is a recipe for failure. The massive shift away from fossil fuel emissions can only happen if the energy companies are taken out of private hands and placed under public ownership and workers control. Otherwise the profit motive will sabotage and frustrate any attempts to radically cut CO2 levels.

His pro-business approach shouldn't be a shock to anyone who has followed his campaign. Although on the whole the big energy, agribusiness and construction industries did not back Obama's bid for presidency, the big finance, technology and insurance companies, such as Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase and Citigroup, did. He is not an enemy of the US capitalist class, as he repeatedly made clear throughout his campaign.

Obama's policies are hollow populist rhetoric, appealing to the real concerns of Americans for the environment without providing real answers. People who want radical change must hold him to his progressive promises and push him to go beyond these limited reforms.

He has already indicated that, due to the recession, the programme of wider reforms he campaigned around will not be completed unless he has a second term indicating that he plans to do little his first. The economic climate will also give him the excuse he needs to protect industries and GDP these will set the agenda for the Obama administration, not concern for the environment.

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