

Watershed Environmental Bill Scheduled for Vote

“No excuse for inaction on this issue is acceptable ... National leadership on this critical issue is long overdue.”

Sen. John McCain made this statement recently at a Senate Commerce Committee hearing he convened as chairman. What was the senator talking about?

- (a.) Campaign finance reform.
- (b.) Taking on big tobacco.
- (c.) Congressional pork-barrel projects run amok.
- (d.) None of the above.

The answer is (d). While Sen. McCain is well known for taking on all three issues above, his latest campaign is focused on ... (drum roll please) ... global warming.

The senator isn't kidding around, either. At the hearing he got feisty with one of the scientists testifying, who was representing the National Academy of Sciences, the organization the federal government turns to for objective, balanced scientific information and conclusions on important topics. The scientist summarized the NAS's most recent climate-change report that said the planet was warming and that human activities (e.g. the burning of coal to create 50 percent of U.S. electricity, the burning of gas in our vehicles) probably accounted for a good deal of this warming. He concluded by recommending further research.

McCain doesn't believe that further scientific research is all that is needed. He expressed his incredulity, given the scientific conclusions of the NAS itself. The scientist replied his comments about appropriate policy steps to take were restrained by his representing the NAS. But if you asked him as a grandfather ... well, much more needed to be done.

(This has led me to conclude there needs to be a new group born out of this: Grandfather Scientists Against Global Warming.)

As anyone remotely familiar with Sen. McCain's career would know, if he says, "No excuse for inaction on this issue is acceptable," and that "National leadership on this critical issue is long overdue," then he must be doing something to provide that leadership.

He is. Big time.

First, he's introduced, along with Sen. Lieberman, the most significant federal legislation yet on climate change, the Climate Stewardship Act, S.139.

Second, back in August when the Senate Republican leadership desperately wanted to pass an energy bill, Sen. McCain cut a deal: his support for an up-or-down vote on his climate bill, with six hours of debate thrown in for good measure.

This was quite a deal, because just about no other senator wants this vote to occur. Why? Because this is a serious bill, a bill with a mandatory cap on U.S. global-warming emissions. This simple fact makes it the most important Senate vote on global warming-ever.

If you're a senator, there's no place to hide on this vote. It's finally time to come clean on where you really stand: are you for responsible action to reduce the threat of global warming? If the answer is yes, then you will be voting yes. It's that simple.

So, once again, Sen. McCain is making many of his Senate colleagues cast what they consider a tough vote--and given the well-financed opposition, it will be a tough vote.

Finally, Sen. McCain is providing leadership by his stated intention to stick with his efforts on addressing climate change for as long as it takes. It's the same thing he did with campaign finance.

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As my senior colleague, Paul Gorman, executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, put it in his testimony before Sen. McCain's committee: "We call upon the Senate ... to address the impact of global climate change on the poor and vulnerable peoples and nations of our planet ... Environmental isolationism is neither morally acceptable nor faithful to God's law."

When asked about impacts on the poor, Gorman read from an article in that day's *Washington Post*. It reported that according to a study of the World Health Organization, global warming could already be causing 160,000 deaths per year in poor countries due to malnutrition, diarrhea and malaria—with children the hardest hit.

Sen. McCain may not be winning friends among the special interests with this latest effort. But as he did with fighting big tobacco, Sen. McCain is standing up for children with his leadership on reducing the impact of global warming. As he said: "No excuse for inaction on this issue is acceptable."

The vote on the McCain-Lieberman Climate Stewardship Act is scheduled for Oct. 14.

You can view testimony from the hearing at <http://commerce.senate.gov/hearings/witnesslist.cfm?id=949>.

A report on the Climate Stewardship Act by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is available at http://web.mit.edu/globalchange/www/MITJPSPGC_Rpt97.pdf.

For a news story on the World Health Organization's report, go to <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/TECH/science/10/01/warming.deaths.reut/>.

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