

AlterNet

VOTER GUIDES



Progressive Voter Guide to the Environment

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The pressing issues on Americans' minds today are the election and the economy. But as we cast our votes for who we think can best right a near sinking financial ship and throw a life preserver around our own economic prospects, there is another important issue to consider: the environment.

Our economic crises are intertwined with energy, food, water and climate issues. In order to save our economy we have to abandon a system that rewards polluters and stifles new, green solutions.

Leaders in the field of economic, green growth, like Van Jones, have called for a green economy, that will "lift all boats," so what is good for one group in the U.S. will be good for all and what is good for the planet will be good for people, too.

There is no doubt that the next president will need to tackle a bunch of environmental issues after taking office, some of which are so important that the rest of the world is waiting and watching.

Clearly the most prominent of these is global warming. The world's leading scientists that form the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have found that human activity, namely the burning of fossil fuels, is dramatically affecting the Earth's climate. They found that over the next 100 years, we are likely to witness rising sea levels, which will displace millions of people in coastal areas; the loss of snow from all but the highest mountains, which will threaten water sources for people and nature; an increase in deserts, resulting in even less water; an acidification of the oceans, which will lead to the destruction of coral reefs; and an increase in the severity of heat waves, which already claim thousands of lives each year. This would be an economic catastrophe as well as an environmental and humanitarian one as well.

As the world leader in greenhouse gas emissions, the United States thus far has played no part in working with the international community on solutions or making any commitments for change. Billions across the world are hoping that will change with our next election.

As Bill McKibben writes, "He who comes next is the Climate Change President." Across the globe, people are holding their breath to see whether the United States will finally join the rest of the world in trying to stop climate change. So who's the best pick?

In the following pages, we take a look at where McCain and Obama both stand on this issue, but we don't stop there. We also examine nine other pressing environmental topics and how the presidential candidates match up. Of special interest are energy issues, which are of course also linked to global warming. The League of Conservation Voters reports: "An election-day poll by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research found that in 2006, energy was the most important issue for independent voters. In 2008, as gas prices skyrocket and time to head off the effects of global warming runs out, recent polling shows energy to be the single most important issue for the entire electorate."

Where do the candidates stand on energy issues like drilling, nuclear, renewables, coal, energy efficiency and biofuels? And how do they compare on other hot-button environmental issues like clean air, green jobs and water? Read on and find out what the candidates say they'll do and what they've actually done.

1. CLIMATE CHANGE

We face economic, humanitarian and environmental crises from unchecked global climate change, including the loss of important water sources that help quench the needs of our industry, agriculture and homes. Our coastal cities will also be threatened by rising sea levels, and the frequency and severity of storms are predicted to increase.

Solution: We need to pass a comprehensive bill on climate change to cut emissions 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050, as the world's leading scientists of the IPCC have prescribed.

Obama's position: Obama supported legislation to cut emissions 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050 and has a plan to achieve that through a market-based cap-and-trade system¹.

McCain's position: McCain co-sponsored the first bill in the Senate calling for mandatory reductions of greenhouse gas emissions, in 2003. He supports action on climate change, but his proposals fall far short of what is recommended by scientists. His plan only calls for a 60 percent drop below 1990 levels by the year 2050.

Learn more: 1Sky², 350.org³, Rainforest Action Network⁴

2. COAL

Half of Americans get their energy from coal, but it is the dirtiest of our energy sources, and the extraction, cleaning and burning of it has caused major environmental and health problems.

Solution: We need to end our use of coal and instead use cleaner, renewable sources of energy. We should not be supporting "clean coal" technology or coal-to-liquids fuels because these do nothing to address the destructive practices of coal extraction, including mountain-top removal mining.

Obama's position: Obama has proposed investing \$150 billion over 10 years in renewables, but this includes so-called "clean coal" technology. He also was the co-sponsor of the Coal-to-Liquid Fuel Promotion Act, which he later "clarified," saying he would only support liquefying coal if it emitted 20 percent less carbon than conventional fuels.

McCain's position: McCain is also a supporter of "clean coal" technologies and wants to spend \$2 billion annually investing in it. He has said he wants to "find a way to use our coal resources without emitting excessive greenhouse gases."

1 <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/01/capandtrade101.html>

2 <http://www.1sky.org/>

3 <http://www.350.org/>

4 <http://www.ran.org/>

Learn more: Appalachian Voices⁵, Coal River Mountain Watch⁶, iLoveMountains.org⁷

3. RENEWABLE ENERGY

As we face dwindling supplies and increasing environmental harm from fossil fuels like oil and coal, not enough attention and resources are being directed toward developing and implementing renewable energy projects.

Solution: Cut our dependence on energy sources that cause carbon emissions and instead focus our resources on clean, renewable sources of energy such as wind, solar and geothermal.

Obama's position: Obama's plan would double federal research money for renewable energy, would aim to get 25 percent of our electricity from clean sources by 2025 and would create a clean technology venture capital fund. Obama supported renewables in the Senate, making it back for a key vote (that McCain failed to vote on) during the primary campaign.

McCain's position: In both 1994 and 1999, McCain voted against more money for renewable energy, including solar. In 2005 he voted against legislation that would have required utilities to get 10 percent of their power from renewable sources. In 2007 he missed every vote on renewable energy. He is against subsidies for wind and solar energy, although he is in favor of subsidies for nuclear power.

Learn more: League of Conservation Voters⁸, Apollo Alliance⁹, Green for All¹⁰

4. BIOFUELS

With the price of gas rising, many people are looking to biofuels, such as ethanol, as a replacement. But growing food for fuel has caused the price of commodities like corn to rise and has increased the use of water and pesticides, causing more environmental harm..

Solution: Explore the development of fuels that are created from waste products and other nonfood items.

Obama's position: Obama's plan calls for 36 billion gallons of biofuels to be used in the United States each year by 2022 and 60 billion gallons of biofuels to be used in the country each year by 2030.

McCain's position: McCain used to be against ethanol but is now in favor of it, although

5 <http://www.appalachianvoices.org/>

6 <http://www.crmw.net/>

7 <http://www.ilovemountains.org/>

8 <http://www.lcv.org/>

9 <http://www.apolloalliance.org/>

10 <http://www.greenforall.org/>

he is not in favor of government subsidies for it. He also favors the development of “second generation” fuels like cellulosic ethanol, which wouldn’t compete with food crops.

Learn more: National Family Farm Coalition¹¹, NRDC¹², New Rules Project¹³

5. ENERGY AND FUEL EFFICIENCY

While there is an increasing recognition that we need to decrease our dependence on foreign sources of energy, there has been little talk about how much money we can save and how much emissions we can cut by increasing efficiency.

Solution: Raise energy efficiency and fuel efficiency standards and help people save money by saving energy and lowering their carbon footprints.

Obama’s position: Obama’s plan has a goal of improving new building efficiency by 50 percent and existing building efficiency by 25 percent in the next 10 years and providing energy incentives for conservation. He voted yes on comprehensive energy legislation that included raising automobile fuel efficiency standards to 35 mpg by 2020.

McCain’s position: McCain has repeatedly voted against raising efficiency standards and still opposes setting a specific target for an increase in fuel efficiency standards. McCain didn’t show up when the Senate voted and approved comprehensive energy legislation that set a deadline to raise automobile fuel efficiency standards to 35 mpg by 2020.

Learn more: Apollo Alliance¹⁴, American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy¹⁵, Alliance to Save Energy¹⁶

6. WATER

We face a water crisis from global warming, pollution, scarcity and privatization. In the next 10 years, 36 U.S. states will be facing water scarcity. Municipalities are strapped for money to maintain and repair aging infrastructure as funding from the federal government has fallen 66 percent since 1991. This has opened the door for the privatization of public water sources, causing rates to rise and services to diminish..

Solution: We need full funding from the federal government to protect and clean up water sources, stop the privatization of municipal water, and ensure adequate funding of our water infrastructure.

11 <http://www.nffc.net/>

12 <http://www.nrdc.org/>

13 <http://www.newrules.org/index.htm>

14 <http://www.apolloalliance.org/>

15 <http://www.aceee.org/>

16 <http://www.ase.org/>



Obama's position: Obama voted for on an amendment that would include \$900 million for flood management and pollution caused by runoff from roads. Obama supports full funding for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, which helps states keep their water clean and safe.

McCain's position: While in Congress, McCain cast 10 votes against clean water, which also were against drinking water protection and enforcement, controlling microbes in water, and money for water pollution control. He supported delaying funds for leaking underground storage tanks and allowing municipalities to set their own standards for toxic waste.

Learn more: Food and Water Watch¹⁷, Corporate Accountability International¹⁸, American Rivers¹⁹

7. OIL DRILLING

As Democrats and Republicans talk about solutions to rising gas prices and reducing our dependence on foreign oil, there has been renewed interest in offshore oil drilling and drilling in ecologically pristine areas like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR).

Solution: New offshore permits and drilling in ANWR should be taken off the table, as they would do nothing to ease the strain of drivers struggling with rising prices.

Obama's position: In 2006, Obama rejected efforts to open up 8 million acres off the coasts of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana for oil and gas drilling. He has also been against drilling in ANWR. However, this summer he said he would reconsider lifting the ban on offshore drilling if it were part of a larger energy bill.

McCain's position: McCain has recently come out in favor of new offshore drilling permits. He does not support opening up ANWR to drilling -- but his running mate, Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska, does.

Learn more: League of Conservation Voters²⁰, NRDC²¹, Sierra Club²²

8. AIR

Coal-burning power plants, vehicle emissions and other pollutants threaten air quality and health.

Solution: We need to phase out coal plants and strengthen the Clean Air Act to make sure corporations are accountable to the communities where they operate.

17 <http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water>

18 <http://www.stopcorporateabuse.org/cms/page1131.cfm>

19 <http://www.americanrivers.org/site/PageServer>

20 <http://www.lcv.org/>

21 <http://www.nrdc.org/>

22 <http://www.sierraclub.org/>



Obama's position: In the Senate, Obama helped to stop Bush's rollbacks on the Clean Air Act, which would have increased industrial emissions of mercury and sulfur. And he fought a Bush administration rule that would have delayed meaningful reductions in mercury emissions from power plants for 20 more years.

McCain's position: McCain voted to squash an amendment that was intended to reinstate the mandate to control toxic emissions from motor vehicles. He also voted yes on the Nickles-Heflin amendment, which would handcuff the EPA's ability to enforce all Clean Air Act requirements and limit citizen suits.

Learn more: Coalition for Clean Air¹, Sierra Club², Environmental Defense Fund³

9. NUCLEAR ENERGY

As awareness about global warming has increased, the nuclear industry is trying to rebrand nuclear power as a clean, renewable source of energy..

Solution: Nuclear power is not a clean or safe form of energy and should not be given government subsidies.

Obama's position: Obama has said that he supports nuclear power if it is clean and safe, but he has not defined what it would take to make nuclear power and its waste clean and safe. He is against the storage of nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain and has not specifically called for building any nuclear power plants

McCain's position: McCain is in favor of nuclear power as an energy source for the United States, and his plan calls for building 45 new nuclear power plants in the country by 2030. He would use money raised from auctioning emissions permits for his global warming plan to spend on R&D for nuclear power. He is in favor of storing nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain but not in favor of nuclear waste traveling through his home state of Arizona to get there.

Learn more: Nuclear Information and Resources Service⁴, Environment America⁵, Beyond Nuclear⁶

10. GREEN JOBS

The economy is tanking and global warming emissions continue to rise despite warnings from leading scientists about the threats of climate change. A green jobs program could help tackle both of these problems at once, but action needs to come from the federal government to jump-start it.

1 <http://www.coalitionforcleanair.org/>

2 <http://www.sierraclub.org/>

3 <http://www.edf.org/home.cfm>

4 <http://www.nirs.org/>

5 <http://www.environmentamerica.org/>

6 <http://www.beyondnuclear.org/>



Solution: We need a federal initiative that would invest \$100 billion over the next two years to help create 2 million new jobs in clean energy products and services. Such a program would provide good-paying jobs for middle-class Americans, help lift people out of poverty, help increase energy efficiency and reduce global warming emissions.

Obama's position: Obama would use revenue from auctioning emissions permits from his global warming plan to help develop cleaner energy sources, create green jobs and help lower-income people pay for their energy bills. He also seeks to create a Clean Energy Jobs Corps and Green Job Corps for disadvantaged youth. His plan would create 5 million new green jobs.

McCain's position: McCain has said he is interested in "building the infrastructure for a non-carbon energy future." However, he missed a key vote in the Senate that would have provided around \$5 billion for renewable energy, energy efficiency and green jobs.

Learn more: Apollo Alliance⁷, Green for All⁸, 350.org⁹

7 <http://www.apolloalliance.org/>

8 <http://www.greenforall.org/>

9 <http://www.350.org/>