

AlterNet

VOTER GUIDES



Progressive Voter Guide to Water Issues



Election Guide to Water Issues

Water is our most important resource and is necessary to sustain life on this planet. Currently we face a water crisis that encompasses water quantity, quality and infrastructure. More and more states are finding they are running short on drinking water, with an estimated 36 states facing scarcity in the next 10 years. This shortfall has been coupled by a 66 percent drop in federal funding in the last 15 years to help states protect their water. As a result, private companies are swooping in to buy public water systems, threatening the democratic control of water and causing rates to increase and services to diminish.

Despite these vast problems, water issues have largely been absent from the public debate and have barely been mentioned by either the Obama or the McCain campaigns. While their energy policies are hotly debated, little is known about where the candidates stand on protecting clean water and what they will do to face a water crisis in the United States and abroad.

We've checked their voting records, and the Obama campaign responded to our inquiries on his water policies. But there are still significant gaps in what the public needs to know about how these candidates are planning to help protect our most important resource. Below is a primer to get your feet wet, as we continue to press both the Obama and McCain camps for more answers.

1. SCARCITY

Thirty-six U.S. states are facing water stress and scarcity in the coming decade, with Western states such as California, New Mexico, Arizona and Nevada already experiencing water stress. Last year, the southeast, including the Atlanta area, nearly ran out of drinking water completely.

Solution: We need to cut down on our consumption of water and employ conservation practices in our homes as well as in industry and agriculture. We need public education about conservation practices, incentives for reducing consumption and increasing efficiency, and new regulations for agriculture and industry. We also need regulations to protect against the pollution and overpumping of groundwater.

Obama's position: Obama says he believes we need to take preparatory measures to ensure our water supplies are used efficiently and equitably. He supports the development of a national water conservation strategy, in coordination with states and municipalities. He plans to create policies to encourage communities to develop voluntary water banks, wastewater treatment and other market-based measures. He will also work to improve technology for water conservation and efficiency, and remove institutional barriers to increase cooperation and collaboration among federal, state and private organizations. Obama wants to help farmers deploy water conservation measures, including irrigation techniques that save energy and water and small reservoirs that farmers can use to capture rainfall.

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.

Learn more: OAEC's WATER Institute¹, Pacific Institute², Global Water Policy Project³

2. POLLUTION

Our waterways are being polluted by industrial, agricultural and domestic runoff, as well as sewage overflows and untreated waste.

Solution: Support community right-to-know legislation that warns people when sewage is dumped into waterways. Begin work with governments, developers and homeowners to implement new storm water management techniques, natural water treatment systems, and protection of wetlands to reduce pollutants and protect watersheds.

Obama's position: Obama introduced legislation to provide \$37.5 million over five years for drinking water systems to upgrade their monitoring and security efforts. He voted yes on an amendment that would include \$900 million over six years to manage flooding and pollution caused by runoff from roads and highways.

1 <http://www.oaec.org/water-institute>

2 http://www.pacinst.org/topics/water_and_sustainability/index.php

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



McCain's position: While in Congress, McCain supported delaying funds for leaking underground storage tanks and allowing municipalities to set their own standards for toxic waste.

Learn more: American Rivers⁴, OEAC'S WATER Institute⁵, Riverkeeper⁶

3. PRIVATIZATION

Municipal water supplies are being targeted by for-profit companies for privatization because federal funding to help support public water systems has fallen drastically in the last few decades. Unfortunately, privatization of public water has been disastrous: Studies show that under privatization, rates go up and services go down. Private companies that care only about their bottom line are also more interested in having people use more water, instead of conserving, which is clearly problematic as areas run short on water.

Solution: We need a clean water trust fund that is a dedicated source of money from the federal government to protect safe drinking water.

Obama's position: Obama's campaign says he will "work with Congress, governors and clean water experts across the nation to determine the best way to protect our water." But he has not taken a position on a federal trust for clean water.

McCain's position: McCain has taken no known position on the issue.

Learn more: Food and Water Watch⁷, Corporate Accountability International⁸, Polaris Institute⁹

4. BOTTLED WATER

Growing bottled water consumption is causing environmental harm from the production and shipping of, as well as the waste from, plastic bottles. Two of the leading companies pushing their bottled water, which is really repackaged tap water, are Coke and Pepsi. Other companies, like Nestle, are mining groundwater and spring water from rural communities for bottled water, causing ecological damage.

Solution: Stop drinking bottled water at home and on the go. Work to end bottled water contracts for cities, restaurants and businesses and at events. Support the rights of communities to prevent bottled water companies from mining rural groundwater and spring water sources.

Obama's position: Many mayors have canceled their cities' bottled water contracts to pro-

- 4 <http://www.americanrivers.org/site/PageServer>
- 5 <http://www.oaec.org/water-institute>
- 6 <http://www.riverkeeper.org/>
- 7 <http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/trust-fund>
- 8 <http://www.stopcorporateabuse.org/cms/page1131.cfm>
- 9 <http://www.polarisinstitute.org/water>

mote public water systems and save taxpayer money. Obama “defers to municipalities’ and states’ authority to determine the best policy for local governments” but has not offered any endorsement of canceling bottled water contracts nor proposed any plan to do so at the federal level.

McCain’s position: McCain has taken no known position on the issue.

Learn more: Food and Water Watch¹⁰, Corporate Accountability International¹¹, Polaris Institute¹²

5. RIGHT TO WATER

There is a growing global struggle between those who see water as a commodity and those who see water as a part of the public trust to be shared by everyone.

Solution: Support a United Nations treaty that recognizes the right to water internationally and to have water declared a human right so that it cannot be bought and sold for profit.

Obama’s position: Obama believes access to clean, fresh water for all must be a critical priority for international development organizations and national governments, and for U.S. overseas assistance policy, but he has not stated whether he would support a UN treaty to ensure clean water for everyone.

McCain’s position: McCain has taken no known position on the issue.

Learn more: Blue Planet Project¹³, Right to Water¹⁴, Food and Water Watch¹⁵

6. CLEAN WATER

The Clean Water Act of 1977 was amended in 1992 to allow the “fills” from mountaintop removal (MTR) mining to be dumped onto waterways, burying them with debris and chemicals, contaminating drinking water and destroying watersheds.

Solution: Support the passage of the Clean Water Protection Act, HR2169, to protect our waters and end MTR mining, which is devastating communities and watersheds in Appalachia.

Obama’s position: Obama says he will support and sign into law legislation that effectively restores the historical scope of the Clean Water Act and advances environmental protection,

10 <http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/bottled>
 11 <http://www.stopcorporateabuse.org/cms/page1353.cfm>
 12 <http://www.polarisinstitute.org/water>
 13 <http://www.blueplanetproject.net/>
 14 <http://www.righttowater.ca/>
 15 <http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/world-water>



community values and public health objectives. But Obama is in favor of so-called “clean coal” and other clean technologies that would continue destructive coal mining practices like MTR..

McCain’s position: McCain has no known position on this legislation but supports furthering coal production, including “clean coal” and coal gasification, which would mean more MTR mining in Appalachia.

Learn more: Appalachian Voices¹⁶, Coal River Mountain Watch¹⁷, ILoveMountains.org¹⁸

7. CLIMATE CHANGE

Global warming is closely linked with the world’s water crisis. Increasing temperatures and changing precipitation patterns are melting glaciers, decreasing snowpack and resulting in less water in streams and rivers that feed drinking water sources and freshwater species.

Solution: Support the passage of a comprehensive bill on climate change to cut emissions 80 percent by 2050, and push for the United States to actively engage with the international community on solutions.

Obama’s position: Obama supports an 80 percent reduction below 1990 levels by 2050. Obama voted yes on an amendment to the Water Resources Development Act reauthorization bill that would require the Army Corps of Engineers to consider the long- and short-term effects of global climate change and to use the best available modern climate science in planning water projects.

McCain’s position: McCain supports a 60 percent reduction below 1990 levels by 2050. McCain did not show up to vote for an amendment to the Water Resources Development Act reauthorization bill that would require the Army Corps of Engineers to consider the long- and short-term effects of global climate change and to use the best available modern climate science in planning water projects.

Learn more: 1Sky¹⁹, 350.org²⁰, Rainforest Action Network²¹

8. OCEANS

The health of our oceans is threatened by a number of factors. There is an increase in oxygen-free “dead zones,” where runoff from fertilizers, industrial agriculture and fossil fuels is killing huge swaths

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

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

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

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

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

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



of sea life. Poor fisheries management has resulted in one-quarter of fish stocks being overfished; another 50 percent are fished to full capacity. And our oceans have become a dumping ground: A “plastic soup” of waste floating in the Pacific Ocean is twice the size of the continental United States and growing.

Solution: We need to reduce and more efficiently use fertilizer, prevent human and animal waste from entering rivers, replant vegetation on riverbanks and restore wetlands. We also need to reduce nitrogen emissions from vehicles and factories, develop alternative energy sources not based on fossil fuels, and ensure that the National Marine Fisheries Service and other regional councils comply with federal laws protecting marine species.

Obama's position: Obama voted for an amendment that would include \$900 million for flood management and pollution caused by runoff from roads.

McCain's position: McCain has taken no known position on the issue.

Learn more: Pew Charitable Trusts²², Ocean Conservancy²³, Oceana²⁴

22 http://www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_category.aspx?id=126

23 <http://www.oceanconservancy.org/site/PageServer?pagename=home>

24 <http://www.oceana.org/north-america/home/>