

Out of Gas

The Environmental Movement Is Running On Empty

By Amanda Carey

Summary: *Despite the environmental movement's enormous effort and great expectations Congress has enacted no comprehensive climate change legislation. There's no carbon tax, no cap-and-trade. In 2009, a cap-and-trade bill did pass the House but it was pulled from the Senate calendar. True, the federal government continues to tighten air quality standards, fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks, and emission controls for plants and factories. But environmentalism's holy grail remains elusive: there's been no bill signing ceremony that recognizes global warming as a man-made planetary threat requiring nationwide controls over carbon emissions. What happened?*

In 2012, three years into President Barack Obama's first term, green activists are asking, "What went wrong?" Where are all the new laws and regulations regulating energy use and the natural resource production? Where are the public-private partnerships signalling a new era of environmentalist problem-solving? Where's Al Gore? Shouldn't he be lurking over President Obama's shoulder, smiling, as the President signs yet another green jobs bill into law?



The question is a good one but one not easily answered. In the decades since the birth of the environmental movement, something's clearly gone wrong. Other movements pushing for political and social change have altered the national discussion and elected candidates at every level of government.

Look at the Tea Party. Born only in 2009, it's pushed back against the agenda of Barack Obama and congressional Democrats, forcing Congress to heel and almost sending the federal government into default.

But the environmental movement seems dead in the water.

Environmentalism Fails: Legislation

In late 2010 Al Gore offered three reasons why the U.S. Senate failed to enact into

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law a cap-and-trade bill: Republican partisanship, the recession, and the influence of special interests. He had a point. Despite endorsements from such Republican senators as John Warner, John McCain and Lindsay Graham, every effort to pass comprehensive climate change legislation during the preceding five years had floundered in the Senate.

In 2007 Connecticut senator Joseph Lieberman (Independent) and Virginia Republican John Warner introduced a cap-and trade bill called the Climate Security Act. Their Lieberman-Warner bill was approved by the Senate Environment and Public Works (EPW) committee and sent to the floor by the committee chairman, Barbara Boxer of California. The bill's advocates said "prompt, decisive action is critical, since global warming pollutants can persist in the atmosphere for more than a century."

The Lieberman-Warner bill aimed to cap greenhouse gas emissions, lowering emission levels each year until 2050, when emissions were supposed to be down to 63 percent below 2005 levels. To achieve

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that goal, the federal government would issue right-to-emit permits to electric utilities and plants in the transportation and manufacturing industries. The bill also provided financial incentives to companies and families to reduce emissions.

The bill was doomed. Full Senate debate took place in the summer of 2008, when the average price of gasoline was well above \$4 per gallon. Republican opponents successfully labeled it the biggest tax hike in history, one that imposed an enormous tax and regulatory burden on industries that would pass the cost burden onto consumers already struggling to pay for gasoline at the pump.

Republicans beat the 2007 climate change bill because they argued that it would raise gas and home heating prices, cost jobs and cripple the economy. It didn't help that 31,000 scientists rejected the notion of man-made global warming in a letter signed and circulated two weeks before the start of the Senate debate.

The next attempt came in the summer of 2009. On June 26, the House of Representatives passed the American Clean Energy and Security Act, otherwise known as Waxman-Markey after its authors, Democratic Reps. Henry Waxman of California and Edward Markey of Massachusetts. For the first time a chamber of Congress passed a law meant to curb carbon emissions linked to climate change. Yet the Senate once again refused to follow through.

The Senate version of Waxman-Markey was shepherded by Democratic Sen.

John Kerry of Massachusetts, South Carolina Republican Lindsey Graham, and Connecticut Independent Joseph Lieberman. (Sen. Warner did not seek reelection in 2008.) Once again, a complex and messy mix of partisan politics, constituent pressures, and special interests combined to thwart passage of the bill.

Even though the Senate was controlled by Democrats, the sponsors of the bill knew they needed Republican votes, which required that certain bill provisions would have to be modified or weakened. But every tweak of the legislation designed to placate a Republican risked losing a Democrat, and every Democrat lost meant finding another Republican.

Kerry, Lieberman and Graham began bargaining with lawmakers. Some Republicans wanted guarantees that the bill would subsidize nuclear power. Lawmakers catering to agricultural interests wanted incentives or offsets for farmers who would be required to purchase emissions-reducing equipment.

Gulf Coast state politicians wanted to protect off-shore oil drilling, and politicians from Kentucky, West Virginia, and Ohio refused to discuss anything that put restrictions on coal plants, which cap-and-trade does by definition. Every special interest had its own demands. For instance, the powerful Edison Electric Institute, which represents shareholder-owned electric power companies, wanted guarantees that carbon costs would never rise above a certain point. To cushion the blow of higher energy costs, it proposed that through the year 2030 electric power

companies receive free emission credits worth billions of dollars.

The White House proposed a “grand bargain”: expand off-shore oil drilling in return for lawmaker support for cap and trade. But the timing couldn’t have been worse. A short time later an oil rig exploded into flames and the Deepwater Horizon well started gushing thousands of gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Under pressure from Senate Republican colleagues and his South Carolina constituents and suspicious of White House double-dealing, Senator Graham pulled his name from the bill, which eventually died without coming up for a vote.

Environmentalism’s Bright Beginnings Turn Pale

The sputtering of the environmental movement and the ignominious collapse of its signature legislation could not have been predicted. But a careful look at the history of environmental activism shows how the movement has been unravelling.

Like the civil rights and antiwar movements, environmentalism’s origins lay in the 1960’s. In June of 1969, the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio burst into flames. Toxic waste had so befouled the water that it ignited.

Only six months earlier the nation witnessed a massive oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, the third largest oil spill in American waters after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon and 1989 Exxon Valdez spills. The imagery of burning rivers and miles of polluted beaches provoked public

outrage and photos of dying sea birds covered in oily muck became a staple of nightly news coverage.

Highly visual incidents like the Santa Barbara oil spill and the burning Cuyahoga River didn’t create the modern environmental movement, but they were catalysts that thrust it into public awareness. Earlier, Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring* had claimed that man-made chemical pesticides like DDT were killing birds and other wildlife, and issues like air pollution and toxic waste aroused public anxiety. Groups like Get Oil Out! (GOO) and the Environmental Defense Center were created in the 1960s, and in 1972 California voters approved a ballot initiative creating the California Coastal Commission with vast powers to regulate economic activities and land use along the state’s coastline.

In April 1970 the first Earth Day was proclaimed by city mayors and celebrated on college campuses. Green activists established radical nonprofits like Friends of the Earth (1969), the Natural Resources Defense Council (1970) and Greenpeace (1971) which challenged older conservation groups to become more aggressive in lobbying politicians and harrasing corporations.

At the federal level President Richard Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by executive order in 1970, and in that same year Congress authorized amendments to the Clean Air Act (passed in 1963) that imposed new regulations, the first of their kind, on industrial and mobile sources of air pollutants. The Clean Water

Act (1972) and Endangered Species Act (1973) followed.

By the late 1970s environmentalists were trying to maintain their early successes, but the movement was increasingly institutionalized and bureaucratized. Most groups were headquartered in Washington, DC, where they spent their energies in fundraising and adapting to political pressures. The Carter administration created a Department of Energy and mandated corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) standards to make cars more fuel-efficient. President Carter tried to set an example by wearing sweaters and installing solar panels on the roof of the White House, but most Americans did not like being told to lower their thermostats and buy smaller cars.

In the 1980s and 90s environmentalism began to lose its glamour and popular appeal. Ronald Reagan put energy policy on the back burner when he became president in 1981 and he tried with limited success to emphasize deregulatory policies. Federal agencies were embroiled in constant litigation and controversy whenever they tried to limit environmental rulemaking. A new set of difficult and often unpopular issues—the ozone hole, global warming and population growth—crowded onto the environmentalist agenda.

The War on Terror dominated the public agenda during the presidency of George W. Bush despite efforts by Al Gore and others to focus public attention on global warming. Gore’s 2006 documentary “An Inconvenient Truth” and his efforts to attribute Hurricane Katrina, melting ice

caps and summer heat waves to man-made climate change failed to generate the crisis atmosphere needed to achieve social and political change.

These days surveys show Americans worry most about the issues of war and the economy. The environment is far down on the list of concerns. In 2010 a Gallup survey reported that 48 percent of respondents believed the threat of global warming is exaggerated.

Public skepticism has been growing steadily since 2006 when the Gallup poll first reported that 30 percent of those surveyed had doubts about global warming. (The figures increased to 33 percent in 2007, 35 percent in 2008 and 41 percent in 2009.) Similar results were recorded in a March 2011 Gallup poll that asked, "How much do you personally worry about global warming?" Only 51 percent said they worried a great deal or a fair amount, a big drop from the 66 percent in 2008 who were troubled by thoughts of melting glaciers and rising sea levels.

Another indicator of waning public interest in environmental issues is a 2011 Rasmussen poll that asked likely U.S. voters to consider what played a bigger role in global warming: solar activity or human behavior? Sixty percent said it was at least somewhat likely that solar activity plays a role in long-term climate change. Only 22 percent said it was unlikely. This gives no comfort to environmentalists like Al Gore who argue that human activity is the number-one cause.

The Movement Runs Out of Gas

Americans' interest in taking action against global warming is waning, but environmental groups insist that public opinion plays no role in explaining Congress's failure to enact comprehensive climate change legislation. Instead, green groups attribute the failure to achieve their goals to the money and power of their opponents. According to their reckoning, environmental groups are stymied by what amounts to a conspiracy of the oil industry, global warming deniers, and the Koch brothers' vast right-wing network.

In the summer of 2011, Dr. Matthew Nisbet of American University released a pioneering 80-page report, which undermines this argument. Nisbet's report, "Climate Shift: Clear Vision for the Next Decade of Public Debate," rejects the argument that the environmental movement has been outspent by right-wing donors like the Koch brothers. It says the data is inconclusive on how much supporters and opponents of a cap-and-trade bill are spending to affect the outcome. For instance, Nisbet compared the budgets of the conservative movement (think tanks, advocacy groups and industry associations) to national environmental organizations. He found that in 2009, major conservative outlets took in a total of \$907 million in revenue, and spent \$787 million. By comparison, green groups took in \$1.7 billion that year and spent \$1.4 billion. Another \$394 million went specifically to climate-change related programs.

Nisbet also looked at lobbying. In the aggregate, conservatives spent a bit more:

\$272 million vs. \$229 million. But in election spending, they far outspent environmentalists in 2010. For instance, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce spent \$33 million, the Karl Rove-advised American Crossroads spent \$22 million and its affiliated Crossroads GPS spent \$17 million in political contributions. By contrast, the League of Conservation Voters spent \$5.5 million, Defenders of Wildlife spent \$1 million and the Sierra Club only \$700,000.

However, state ballot initiatives tell a different story. California's Proposition 23 is a case in point. The 2010 initiative, heavily funded by Texas-based oil companies, would have halted California regulations on greenhouse gas emissions until there was a decline in the state's rate of unemployment. Supporters of the measure raised about \$10.6 million. But opponents raised \$25 million, with significant sums from environmental groups. The National Wildlife Foundation reported spending \$3 million, the National Resources Defense Council \$1.67 million, and the League of Conservation Voters \$1.1 million.

Nisbet also looked at foundation funding for climate change projects. What he found confirmed a 2007 study, "Design to Win: Philanthropy's Role in the Fight Against Global Warming," which noted that philanthropists are strategic funders of environmental causes and seek to achieve specific policy goals.

It's clear that overall, the environmental movement does not have a money problem. So what's the problem? One prominent environmentalist, Daniel J. Weiss of Center for American Progress Action Fund, argues

that the recession has played an outsized role in thwarting environmental goals. “It makes people more sensitive to the argument that various proposals will cost jobs,” says Weiss. “Oil and coal industries have made these arguments every time... but they’re falling on more receptive ears now.”

Tom Borelli, a climate-change skeptic at the National Center for Public Policy Research, agrees that a weak economy explains environmentalism’s downward spiral. “All along they were riding the wealth of our nation,” says Borelli. “Now the whole green bubble is exploding.” He points out that the movement’s energy agenda—the war on fossil fuels and the push for renewable energy—have always been unsustainable. “That’s where they failed.”

No One to Blame But Itself

But there’s yet another reason, one that activists are loathe to acknowledge, and it’s this: Their scare tactics have backfired. Environmental groups have done nothing but create enemies by labeling as “global warming deniers” anyone who dares to ask questions about man-made climate change. Critics like Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, who in 2005 called global warming the “greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people,” remain a minority in Congress.

Far more typical is Iowa Sen. Chuck Grassley, who in 2009 said, “The scientific aspect that I’m still reserving judgment on is the extent to which it’s manmade or natural.” Pennsylvania Sen. Pat Toomey

actually agrees the data is “pretty clear” that there has been an increase in the earth’s surface temperature, but he adds that “the extent to which that has been caused by human activity I think is not clear. I think that is very much disputed and has been debated.”

Extremist rhetoric has badly damaged the environmentalist cause. The Danish environmental writer Bjorn Lomborg and two enlightened environmentalists at the Breakthrough Institute, Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, put the blame squarely on the environmental movement. It has no one to blame but itself.

In his latest book, *Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist’s Guide to Global Warming*, Lomborg observes that there are more important scientific problems to tackle than global warming. Activists should work to provide clean water and address public health issues around the world. By calling for government mandates costing billions of dollars in an implausible attempt to lower the earth’s temperature Lomborg says environmental activists are squandering the public’s goodwill and exhausting its patience.

Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger urged environmentalists to abandon their doomsday fantasies in “The Death of Environmentalism,” a 2004 paper they wrote for the Environmental Grantmakers Association. It made them outcasts in the environmental movement. Last February, in a speech at Yale University, they revisited the paper and concluded that the problems they identified had only worsened in the years since.

Nordhaus and Shellenberger said that when Al Gore attacks Republicans for waging a war on science and calls on Americans to “change the way we live our lives,” he is undermining the public’s “need to maintain a positive view of the existing social order” and guaranteeing that millions of Americans will reject his counsel.

Greens reacted to these developments not by toning down their rhetoric or reconsidering their agenda in a manner that might be more palatable to their opponents. Instead, they made ever more apocalyptic claims about global warming - claims that were increasingly inconsistent, ironically, with the scientific consensus whose mantle greens claimed.

In 2012, it’s clear that scare tactics and apocalyptic predictions have failed to persuade. The environmental movement is not gaining traction with either legislators or the public. As Tom Borelli puts it, “They’re now going to be playing defense. And they’re not used to that.”

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In a report prosaically titled “**Industrious Subversion - Circumvention of Oversight In Solid Waste and Recycling In New Jersey**,” New Jersey’s **State Commission of Investigation** claims that various unsavory characters with ties to organized crime are raking in millions in the Garden State’s green recycling industry. According to the report, “... emerging global markets in recycling, including commerce in so-called “e-waste” – the reclamation and resale of junked computer components and other high-tech electronic detritus – offer financially attractive, yet thoroughly unregulated avenues of diversification for legitimate and corrupt business interests alike.” Looks like the mob finally got hip to the real money-making racket – the green industry.

For all you who put up a fake tree last month in hopes that it was an eco-friendly way to celebrate Christmas, some bad news via **National Geographic**: Fake trees are fake environmentalism. As **Rick Dungey**, spokesperson for the National Christmas Tree Association, put it, “All of the environmental groups and all of the scientists say you should use a real tree. The debate is over... The only people still talking about it are the people trying to sell fake trees.” Why? “Artificial trees are made from a kind of plastic called polyvinyl chloride, which is derived from petroleum and can contain lead or other harmful toxins. Furthermore, according to the **U.S. Commerce Department**, about 80 percent of fake trees are manufactured in China, where most electricity is generated by burning coal—one of the dirtiest fuel sources.” Plus, real trees smell better.

Mark Ruffalo will be the latest actor to portray **Marvel Comics’** Incredible Hulk in next summer’s big screen extravaganza “The Avengers,” and he is taking his super hero duties super seriously. In fact, Ruffalo is drawing inspiration from his emerald alter-ego in his fight against hydrofracking in New York. *The Capitol* quotes Ruffalo: “The great thing about the Avengers and our superhero mythology is that they are people that fight for the common man over impossible odds, and for the betterment of the whole...So in some ways, that whole mythology feeds into what I’m trying to do here.” Yeah Mark, a millionaire trying to thwart resource production, kill jobs, and drive up energy costs for poor Americans is just like “The Avengers.”

As *Green Notes* goes to press, lawmakers appear to have struck a deal to overturn the light-bulb ban in the **2007 Energy Independence and Security Act**, which would have made the 100-watt Edison illegal to sell in the U.S. as of January 1, 2012. The *Washington Times* reports: “The spending bill doesn’t actually amend the 2007 law, but does prohibit the administration from spending any money to carry out the light bulb standards — which amounts to at least a temporary reprieve.” *Green Notes* hopes everyone got bulbs in their stockings, just in case.

In October, 2011 **Coca-Cola** announced it would be changing its iconic red cans to a polar white from November to March to draw attention to its partnership with the **World Wildlife Fund** to protect the habitat of polar bears. Unfortunately, as the *Associated Press* reported, “...the change evoked a not very warm or fuzzy reaction from some Coke drinkers. Some complained the new cans were too similar to Diet Coke’s silver cans. Others thought the soda inside tasted different and went online to complain.” Coke acquiesced to public uproar and pledged to add “red cans to the mix in response to consumer requests.” Meanwhile, a polar bear eating a dead seal carcass on an ice flow in the North Pole had no comment on the controversy.