

Los Angeles Times

ORANGE COUNTY COMMENTARY

Republicans Could Put EPA on Endangered List

BY DENNIS J. AIGNER

In a Doonesbury cartoon published early this year, President Bush and a White House staffer detailed how the administration had gutted environmental protections in order to make contributors from the extractive industries happy. The strip ended with the president declaring, "Whoa, that's quite a list. Does Christie Whitman still work for us?" At that time, the staffer's response was, "I can check." Now it would be a simple "No."

Though not as overt a campaign as that waged by President Reagan, the administration's anti-environment agenda is certainly as aggressive. During the 1980s, congressional oversight blunted most of Reagan's agenda. Oversight is missing in the current House of Representatives, but the Senate remains a place where the environment still has a chance.

In the 107th Congress, Senate Democrats voted pro-environment 72% of the time. In the House, the percentage was 79%. For Republicans, the figures were a dismal 13% in the Senate and 17% in the House.

New England legislators had the best pro-environment voting record regardless of party lines, followed closely by the Mid-Atlantic states. In the West, California and Hawaii are the most pro-environment, with Nevada, Oregon and Washington posting respectable records. But Alaska and Idaho are among the five most anti-environment states based upon how their legislators vote. That puts the West in the middle of the pack with the Southeast and Southwest (with a few Rocky Mountain states thrown in) at the rear.

Americans grew more negative about the quality of the environment in March 2003, according to the Gallup Organization, with only 33% saying it's getting better. That's down from 40% a year earlier. Negative views on environmental conditions increased to 47% from 38% last year. Forty-seven percent say the environment ought to be given top priority, with 42% giving the economy top preference. Last year, it was environment 54% and economy, 36%. For most of the '90s, the public favored the environment by a 2-1 ratio. So long as Bush continues to portray things as the economy versus the environment, and people believe him, this could be a very rough few years for the environment.

California Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, both Democrats, are pro-environment, with voting records in the 107th Congress of 80% and 96%, respectively. Our local Orange County representatives voted along party lines, but the Republicans' records were all below the national average. Rep. Ed Royce (R-Fullerton) voted "pro" on only two of the 22 environmental bills considered during 2001 and 2002. Rep. Christopher Cox (R-Newport Beach) and Dana Rohrabacher (R-Huntington Beach) each voted for three. Both Royce and Rohrabacher voted against prohibiting offshore drilling in 36 undeveloped federal leases off the California coast—but the bill passed. Rep. Loretta Sanchez (D-Garden Grove) voted pro-environment on all 22 bills.

The list of Bush's anti-environment decisions and proposals has grown substantially since the Doonesbury cartoon. The administration's agenda

is prosecuted with the aid of an aggressive program of information control, the prime examples being the stripping of a section on global warming from an annual Environmental Protection Agency report on air pollution trends and the severe editing of a section of the EPA's recently released Draft Report on the Environment. This latter action prompted Russell Train, a former EPA administrator, to write in the New York Times, "Having served under both Presidents Nixon and Ford, I can state categorically that there never was such White House intrusion into the business of the EPA during my tenure."

Bush's recent nomination of Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt to succeed Whitman at the EPA is seen by some environmental groups as a dramatic lurch to the right. If it is, then flash forward to a future Doonesbury cartoon: Bush to staffer: "Does the EPA still exist?" Staffer to president: "I can check."

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