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BOYCOTT A BAD ENERGY BILL

by Howard Geller

As I write this piece in late March, the U.S. has attacked Iraq. President Bush claims it is due to Iraq's alleged stock of weapons of mass destruction and links to terrorist organizations. Others believe it is due in part to gain control of Iraq's critical oil resources. After Saudi Arabia, Iraq has more known oil reserves than any other nation.

Future Iraqi leaders are likely to increase oil production in response to pressure from the U.S.—that is after Iraq's oil industry is rebuilt. Rebuilding Iraq's oil production capacity (and other infrastructure) will no doubt cost billions of dollars...dollars that are likely to go to companies like Halliburton, with close ties to the Bush Administration. Watching which companies get these contracts, and how much they contribute to President Bush's reelection campaign, will be interesting.

With war underway in Iraq and gasoline prices approaching \$2 per gallon, there is renewed interest in national energy legislation. In an important victory for environmentalists and a blow to the Administration's energy strategy, the U.S. Senate has once again rejected opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil production. But a comprehensive energy bill drafted by Rep. Barton (R-Texas) has begun to move forward in the House of Representatives.

The Barton energy bill, along with energy policies proposed by President Bush and Vice President Cheney, can be characterized as "old energy thinking." Old energy thinking focuses on greater production of conventional energy sources. It pays lip service but provides minimal real support to improving energy efficiency or implementing new renewable energy sources. It downplays environmental concerns by advocating more fossil fuel production on sensitive public lands. And it calls for weaker emissions standards and more subsidies to fossil fuels and nuclear energy.

By virtually ignoring energy efficiency and renewable energy sources, old energy thinking does relatively little to reduce America's oil addiction and oil import dependence. It encourages highly polluting energy sources such as coalbed methane development on western lands. It ignores the serious threat of global warming, instead maintaining rising carbon dioxide emissions and America's disproportionate contribution to global warming. And by repealing some federal regulations and "streamlining" the approval process for energy supply facilities, old energy thinking is an assault on consumers and public participation in the decision making process.

America needs and deserves better. Sensible energy legislation would concentrate on improving energy efficiency in our homes, workplaces and vehicles as well implementing renewable energy sources. It would keep sensitive public lands off-limits to fossil fuel production while reducing our oil dependence through greater efficiency and production of alternative, renewable fuels. It would reduce absolute levels of carbon dioxide emissions starting now, enabling the U.S. to join other industrialized nations that are seriously confronting the threat of global warming. It would expand consumer protection and enhance public participation in energy-related decisions, not

reduce them. And it would cut subsidies for polluting fossil fuel technologies or nuclear energy, not increase them.

Given that proponents of “old energy thinking” are running the show in Washington, DC these days, what should renewable energy and energy efficiency advocates do? One school of thought says that bad energy legislation is inevitable, and that efficiency and renewable energy advocates should try to get whatever “crumbs” they can into this legislation. Another school of thought says that the overall energy package will be so rotten that it not worth trying to “green up,” and that energy efficiency and renewable energy advocates should stand firm with environmental and consumer advocates who strongly oppose a bad energy bill.

I favor and recommend the latter approach. First, Congressional leaders do not appear willing to include measures that will significantly improve energy efficiency or renewable energy. We know that a Bush-Cheney-Barton-Domenici energy bill will do far more harm than good in terms of moving our nation away from polluting fossil fuels and nuclear energy to renewable energy sources. Whether the bill is 98 percent bad, 95 percent bad, or 92 percent bad hardly matters. Second, including weak energy efficiency and renewable energy provisions in the bill, such as a weak national Renewable Portfolio Standard, could undermine efforts to adopt strong efficiency and renewable energy provisions at the state and local levels.

Last but not least, I do not believe that adoption of bad national energy legislation is inevitable. There are many complex issues in the bill that split votes along non-partisan lines (e.g., those in favor of increasing federal authority vs. those in favor of greater state authority, farm states vs. non-farm states, etc.). It is possible that comprehensive energy legislation could go down to defeat yet again, due to the controversial provisions likely to be included in the bill as well as vigorous opposition from consumer and environmental defenders. Energy efficiency and renewable energy advocates can contribute to the defeat of bad energy legislation by acknowledging that the energy efficiency and renewable energy provisions will in all likelihood be very weak and by saying that “on balance, this bill stinks.”

At the same time that energy efficiency and renewable energy advocates boycott a bad energy bill, they can still articulate and advocate broad energy legislation that would truly benefit consumers, national security, and the environment, even if it stands little chance of enactment today. They can work on the adoption of important policies such as tax incentives for innovative renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies, separate from a bad energy bill. And energy efficiency and renewable energy advocates can continue to advocate and help enact strong energy efficiency and renewable energy incentives and requirements, along with tougher consumer protections and emissions standards, at the state and local levels.

Given the cast of characters now running the show in Washington, states and localities are where the real action is for advancing energy efficiency and renewable energy supply. Boycotting a bad national energy bill can be done in combination with advancing the clean energy revolution.

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