

# GOP, special interests to wage environmental war in 2011

By Jon Gingerich

**O**n January 19, Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives sent a message. With a vote of 245 to 189 they passed the “Repealing the Job-Killing Health Care Law Act,” a bill that would, as its title suggests, nullify President Obama’s new Affordable Care Act.

It was a toothless threat by design, and a Pyrrhic victory at best: the Senate won’t even bother to schedule a vote on it, let alone give Obama the chance to wave a vetoing hand. But a message nonetheless. Republicans of the 112th Congress have made no bones about the order of business for the coming year: repeal recent Democrat-enacted laws, eliminate unnecessary spending, and restore GOP rule. More often than not, any forthcoming legislation will be pitched as part and parcel of this three-pronged plan.

On January 20, the Republican Study Committee, chaired by Representative Jim Jordan (R-OH), unveiled the “Spending Reduction Act of 2011.” It’s a budgetary hit list that sets its sights on more than 100 Federal and State agencies as well as subsidy programs. If passed, the proposed bill would freeze discretionary spending on many budgetary dockets until 2021. What’s more, Republicans claim it could save \$2.5 trillion in federal spending over the next ten years.

But there’s a problem. As with most partisan politics, the bill is cherry picked to eliminate or vastly reduce programs that run contrary to the authoring party’s core principles. It’s a no-brainer in politics, and a primer for belt-tightening matters in day-to-day life: you save money by cutting out the things you don’t like. In this case, House Republicans have devised a novel way to save federal money, and like all budgetary diets there is a scapegoat: environmental programs.

While funding for the military, subsidies for fossil fuels and ethanol production, homeland security and wars abroad remain intact, the “Spending Reduction Act” proposes cuts to nearly a dozen programs that fund everything from mass transit to scientific innovation into clean and sustainable energy to energy assistance programs to bills that address a glut of current environmental concerns.

The result: if House Republicans get their way, environmental progress in 2011 will be a shell of what has been implemented into federal programs for years, and in

many cases, decades.

Among the environmental slashing portion of the proposed bill:

Removing \$52 million in funding each year from the Energy Star Program, the now-international standard for manufacturing energy efficient products. Developed by the Environmental Protection Agency almost twenty years ago, the EPA estimates Energy Star saves approximately \$14 billion in energy costs each year in the United States alone.

Cutting \$12.5 million a year in subsidies to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the intergovernmental scientific body established in 1988 by the United Nations and the World Meteorological Organization to review and assess ongoing research into climate change.

Energy assistance programs. Specifically, eliminating \$530 million a year from the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP), which is made up of funds given by the United States Department of Energy to enable low-income households to reduce their energy bills by making their homes more energy efficient. According to DOE, the program has been responsible for improving energy efficiency in nearly 6.5 million households, and families receiving WAP assistance see their annual energy bills drop by an average of about \$400.

Grant programs. The bill wants to gut \$1.27 billion a year from the Department of Energy’s Applied Research program, as well as \$70 million from the Department of Commerce’s Technology Innovation Program, a grant program that awards innovative U.S. businesses and institutions that develop early-stage technologies yet don’t have the funds to create them.

Alternative energy. Cutting \$200 million a year from the FreedomCAR and Fuel Partnership, an effort involving the U.S. Department of Energy and U.S. automakers to support ongoing research into new hydrogen production and technologies for automobiles.

Organic farming. Specifically, the National Organic Certification Cost-Share Program would lose \$150 million a year. The Cost-Share Program is part of the Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) Program, which gives cost-share assistance to USDA-certified producers that are either newly certified or renewing their organic farming certification.

Shrinking mass transit. Slashing \$2.5 billion a year from Intercity and High Speed Rail Grants. In January 2010, the U.S. Department of Transportation awarded \$8

billion to states for the development of a national, high-speed intercity passenger rail service. The investment was expected to create or save tens of thousands of jobs in everything from track-laying, manufacturing, planning and engineering, and rail maintenance and operations.

It isn’t the only mass transit program to get the axe. The proposal also suggests cutting \$1.6 billion a year in Amtrak subsidies, as well as an additional \$2 billion a year from New Starts Transit, a national funding initiative that provides federal funds to public transit agencies for the construction of new transit systems in metropolitan areas. The proposal also takes aim at regional mass transit, suggesting \$150 million in cuts each year to Washington, D.C.’s Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

If passed, environmental spending won’t be the Spending Reduction Act’s only victim. Other reforms include elimination of automatic pay increases for federal workers, massive cuts to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, cutting \$138 million in funding from the Title X Family Planning program that provides health services to low-income families, cuts to Public Broadcasting subsidies, cuts to the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, elimination of death gratuity for members of Congress, repeal of the Davis-Bacon Act, returning the control of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to private enterprise and finally, eliminating all remaining Stimulus funds (née the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act), which currently stands at about \$45 billion.

## Big business for anti-environment

November 2010 saw two crucial moments in recent political history: record-breaking campaign contributions from corporate interests and a subsequent GOP takeover in the House. It was the first chance corporate coffers got to spend limitless funds on the candidate sympathetic to their cause, per the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision that effectively rendered the campaign finance laws of McCain-Feingold null and void.

The results were the stuff of history: \$295 million spent by non-campaigning interest groups, more than four times larger than what was spent during the 2006 Midterms. But the pendulum swung too far. Across the nation, corporations began lining up to rally not only polluter-friendly Congressional seats, but the passage of

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state laws hundreds or thousands of miles away from the benefiting corporation's base of operations.

In California there was Proposition 23, which attempted to repeal the state's existing greenhouse gas emissions laws as enacted by the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006. Campaigning under the title "California Jobs Initiative Committee," the organization — which is Co-Chaired by former Reagan-era Secretary of State George Shultz — managed to raise about \$10 million to repeal the law, funds gathered not only by in-state oil corporations like Occidental Petroleum Corporation and World Oil, but from a groundswell of financial support in numerous out-of-state oil and mining corporations such as Frontier Oil, Holly Corporation, Valero Corp. and Tesoro Corp. (all from Texas), mining giant Murray Energy (Ohio) and Koch Industries (Kansas).

The second largest privately held company in the U.S., Koch has been working overtime in recent years to pour more money into global warming denial groups and anti-climate legislation. Between 2006 and 2009, Koch spent nearly \$25 million on anti-climate organizations, and another \$37 million between 2006 and 2009. They recently gave \$1 million to the Cato Institute, which hosts global-warming-denial site [globalwarming.org](http://globalwarming.org). Koch is a frequent supporter of Tea Party affiliate FreedomWorks, and brothers David and Charles Koch were responsible for the creation of pro-pollution conservative group Americans for Prosperity. Known for petitioning members of Congress to abstain from signing climate-change legislation, the group is also famous for a series of political ads that are now under investigation for direct campaign intervention.

#### **Front groups mobilize, find young support**

Concurrent with GOP fat-cutting legislation and strategic spending streams from corporate donors, front groups mobilized their efforts in 2010 for what is sure to be a showdown this year.

The tactics are familiar: create an environmentally friendly moniker (or better yet, a pro-jobs moniker), devise a logo that incorporates wanton use of the color green, curry corporate support, and unleash a misleading PR campaign. It's a glib formula, but one that has grown palpable, not to mention increasingly nefarious in recent years.

One need not look any further than the America's Wetland Foundation, a front group funded by the American Petroleum Institute, which spent the better half of 2010 devising commercials and ad campaigns that "raise awareness" of the beauty and fragility of U.S. Wetlands while asking citizens to petition Congress to make taxpayers

pay for coastal damages caused by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The organization is sponsored by Shell, Chevron, BP and CITGO.

Unlike previous tactics however, recent evidence suggests that petroleum-influenced groups are now thinking long-term. In some cases they're stooping for citizen support, literally: they're bringing the petroleum agenda to kids in schools.

There was Balanced Education for Everyone, a short-lived anti-global warming campaign run by conservative women's group Independent Women's Forum. In April, the campaign called on U.S. schools to remove the "junk science" teachings of global warming from classrooms, and even petitioned a legal ban on discussions of global warming in classrooms in Mesa County, Colorado.

There's the Alliance for Climate Education, an Oakland, California nonprofit that makes trips to U.S. classrooms to educate children on alternative energy and the dangers of climate change, with slick video and music presentations encouraging kids to start local recycling programs and become involved in everyday sustainable efforts. A selfless endeavor on its sleeve, ACE is led by wind turbine entrepreneur Michael Haas, who in 2006 sold his former company Orion Energy LLC to British Petroleum for a reported \$6 million. Understandably, Haas has since tried to maintain his PR gloss by severing ties to the petroleum giant. On ACE's current board roster however, is member Jim Eisen, formerly Vice President of Policy and Regulatory Affairs for BP's Alternative Energy arm.

Finally, there's coal lobby front the American Coalition for Clean Coal and Electricity, whose members include Arch Coal, GE, American Electric Power, Allegheny Energy and Alpha Natural Resources. ACCCE recently kicked off a Christmas Web campaign aimed at kids, where users can visit a Web site and watch anthropomorphized lumps of coal dressed up as snowmen that sing carols like "Frosty the Coalman," extolling the wonders of "clean" coal. The site was taken down due to "underwhelming" Web traffic numbers.

Some experts believe this new strategy is part of a larger initiative used by other industry groups for years: get them while they're young.

"What we've been finding is that energy companies have started to invest in developing curriculum, they're putting a lot into education programs for kids," said Anne Landman, Managing Editor for Center for Media and Democracy. "They're doing exactly what the tobacco companies did decades ago: planning for the long-term." ●

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