

Just warming up? Moving backwards on the environment: Moving backwards on the environment

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President Bush's decision to pull the U.S. out of the Kyoto agreement on global warming amounted to a gratuitous dismissal of the decade-long negotiations on reducing greenhouse gases. With action on the Kyoto treaty permanently stalled in the U.S. Senate, Bush could easily have indicated his unhappiness with the treaty simply by letting it languish in Congress. By opting out of Kyoto, he undermined the credibility of the U.S. in signing future agreements and signaled to the rest of the world that the U.S. will go its own way in addressing global warming.

That solo act is hard to tolerate given that the U.S., with only 4 percent of the world's population, releases about 25 percent of the world's heat-trapping gases. Those figures underscore why U.S. participation is key to any global effort to reduce climate changes.

The Bush administration claims it is still committed to addressing global warming, and it promises to offer an approach that improves on Kyoto by relying on market incentives and new technologies rather than strict caps on emissions. If Bush wants to retain credibility on the issue, he must not only offer such a strategy, and soon, but also provide compelling global leadership for it.

Bush's ditching of Kyoto was one of several ominous steps backward on the environmental front. Breaking a campaign pledge, Bush announced he would not seek to regulate carbon dioxide emissions, one of the chief contributors to global warming. He also decided not to tighten safety standards on arsenic in drinking water, thereby turning his back on recommendations from the National Academy of Sciences and the World Health Organization. His administration also appears poised to push for oil and gas exploration in the fragile Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.

The Bush administration has justified these moves by appealing to either the economic burden of environmental regulation or (pointing to the power blackouts in California) an alleged energy crisis. It appears that the Bush administration views economic growth as an obvious trump card, and cheap energy an irrefutable good. It feels no need even to talk of conservation or of alternative energy sources (nor is it willing to acknowledge that the California crisis stems from political choices, not energy shortfalls).

Oil, gas and mining companies contributed heavily to Bush's campaign and to other Republicans. Are they now calling the shots at the White House, while the environment-friendly voices, such as Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and Environmental Protection Agency chief Christine Todd Whitman, are ignored? At this point, Bush has a lot to do to convince us otherwise.