

Focus the Nation

by Michael Welch

According to the League of Conservation Voters, since January 2007, the hosts of popular news shows on five major TV networks—ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox News, and CNN—have asked the presidential candidates almost 3,000 questions. Of these thousands, only *six* mentioned global warming. Six. That calculates to about two-tenths of 1%—and is about the same number of questions posed to the candidates about UFOs.

Is anyone besides me wondering why reporters are ignoring one of the most urgent threats to humanity?

I guess it's not much of a mystery, considering that for-profit corporations, which are legally required to put shareholder profits ahead of all other considerations, own almost all media in the United States. Many are also heavily invested in or even owned by energy companies (for example, General Electric, which owns NBC) and have board members who sit on the boards of other corporations, including oil companies and defense contractors.

Major media relies largely on advertising sales, so little impetus exists for them to focus on anything other than programming that maximizes ad revenues. Nor is there any incentive for their advertisers to support programming that deals with topical issues that could possibly countermand the need or desire for the products and services being hocked.

But six measly questions? Jeez.

Pointing to the People

Of course, we cannot put all the blame on the media for not focusing on this all-important issue, when our citizenry is not paying much attention to it, let alone making the needed lifestyle changes. One morning I was reading a local newspaper, which publishes “person on the street” responses to particular questions. The question that day asked what issues were most important for presidential candidates to address. Not one of the five respondents mentioned energy or climate as a priority. The fact that these answers came from people in southern Humboldt County—a hotbed of rural social and political activism—shocked me. Especially considering that it's also a community well versed in renewable energy, having more RE-powered homes per capita than any other region of the world.

But maybe I shouldn't have been surprised—even those of us “in the know” are having trouble dealing with the issue. Most of us involved in the local Redwood Alliance Climate Action Project, a volunteer group addressing global



warming education and advocacy, struggle to make the needed changes in our lives that could help turn around climate change. Most of us still buy clothing, furniture, and appliances made overseas and shipped at huge energy costs. We still buy imported fruit, vegetables, and grains, rather than locally grown produce. And we are still having trouble cutting back significantly on the energy use in our homes and workplaces. Probably worst of all, we are driving our vehicles way too much—it's too convenient, fuel is still relatively inexpensive, and few public transportation options exist.

When so many who are already aware and active in global warming education are having trouble stepping up, it makes me think about what's really needed to pull off a major reduction in greenhouse gases (GHGs) to keep Earth hospitable for us humans. Those thoughts have led me to a conclusion that I am struggling with—rather than relying on ourselves, we may have to rely on politicians and the political process to make the sweeping changes needed to stop human-caused climate change.

More and more, I think that global warming won't be stopped without governments worldwide enacting and enforcing laws, and our own government taking the lead—both because we can set an example and because our consumptive American lifestyle makes us one of the world's leading GHG contributors.

We Can Demand...

This is not going to be easy. Too many politicians are used to favoring business over the citizenry, so a lot of citizen contact will be needed to overcome the corporate favoritism. The good news is that groups across the nation are already gearing up to push for decreases in CO₂ emissions, and many are targeting politicians and asking their memberships to do the same. And there are powerful allies within the scientific community who are stressing the science behind climate change. The science is hard to deny, and political leaders won't have easy excuses to ignore the need to make climate action a high priority.

The minimum need, as recognized by scientists and astute politicians and individuals, is to make sure that worldwide GHG production is reduced by 70% to 80% less than 2000 levels. This needs to be accomplished by 2050 to avoid a temperature increase that we might not be able to recover from—the “tipping point.” Under that scenario, GHG emissions from all nations are assumed to peak within about 15 years, so we must begin working toward the decrease soon.

With that goal in mind, here's a sampling of what we citizens should be asking our politicians for, en masse:

- Require even greater vehicle fuel economy. Forget about the measly 45 to 55 mpg that is attainable only in the most fuel-efficient vehicles of the day. We want 100 mpg vehicles with low emissions to match. We need to stop letting auto manufacturers and oil companies dictate what we get—it is time to force them into dealing with the global warming issues that they have largely created.
- Improve and increase mass transportation options—everything from buses to light rail to regional trains, and with ridership incentives to help wean folks from their single-passenger car commutes.
- Take away corporate welfare for the coal, oil, natural gas, and nuclear industries. It is time to put all of our energy subsidy dollars into technologies that are safe, clean, and renewable.
- Help big business get involved in RE by giving them incentives to design, build, and sell clean-energy products and fuel-efficient vehicles. The profit carrot will be as, if not more, helpful for them as the regulatory stick.
- Cap the amount of greenhouse gases that nonrenewable-fuel-based power plants are allowed to produce at levels equal to the amount produced by renewable-fuel-based plants. Make the fines for exceeding the caps significant, since the financial bottom line is the only thing that forces energy corporations to act. Allow CO₂ trading to encourage power plants to reduce their carbon outputs even further below the caps.
- Pay utilities to decommission their polluting plants in favor of ones that create fewer GHGs and other pollutants. Again, the carrot.
- Establish incentives for appliance manufacturers to produce highly efficient products, and add personal incentives so that even low-income households and small businesses can afford to upgrade to more efficient appliances.

- Fund incentives that encourage energy conservation in homes and businesses—particularly where heating, air conditioning, and lighting are concerned.
- Increase nationwide tax credits and per-KWH incentives for the installation of RE systems on homes and businesses. Implement a nationwide net metering program that pays at retail rates, even for excess energy generated at the end of the year.
- Stop the deforestation of tropical rainforests, and begin reforesting those areas that have been decimated.

Time for Change

So while our major media reflects the corporate stance of downplaying global warming, and while progress is slow on the individual front, what we all can do is get grounded in the facts and hold the politicians' and bureaucrats' feet to the fire. We need to focus our nation and the world on the cure for human-caused climate change, and the time to start is now, in preparation for the race for the presidency this fall.

What can you do? For a start, write and call the candidates, as well as legislators and other federal politicians. Let them know that stopping global warming is important to you. Contribute both finances and personal energy to the campaigns that promise to make the biggest difference—a strategy that will help offset the money being loaded into the campaigns by the fossil-fueled business-as-usual interests that prefer short-term profits over long-term planetary survival. Finally, write the newspapers and other media about your concerns that candidates are not addressing this all-important issue. Let's take this back into our control, by focusing the nation on this most important of issues.

Access

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Climate Science:

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change • www.ipcc.ch

RealClimate • www.realclimate.org

Union of Concerned Scientists • www.ucsusa.org/scientific_integrity

Climate Education & Advocacy:

“Carbon-Free & Nuclear-Free: A Roadmap for U.S. Energy Policy” • www.ieer.org

Focus the Nation • www.focusthenation.org

League of Conservation Voters • www.whataretheywaitingfor.com • Information on major media questions asked of presidential candidates

