

StarTribune

Different approaches on energy policy

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October 3, 2004

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Undecided voters should look closely at the presidential candidates' approaches to energy; they chart very different paths for our future. But voters should also do so because the candidates' respective stances reveal much about their character.

President Bush has pushed an irresponsible and outdated policy that promotes dirty technologies of the past and advances the short-term interests of the big energy companies. Under the leadership of Vice President Dick Cheney, this administration developed its energy plan in secret meetings with leaders of major energy companies, while excluding those with alternative views. Their plan has left us with oil at \$50 a barrel, \$2 gasoline and more pollution. It's the wrong course for America.

The cornerstone of Sen. John Kerry's energy policy is a commitment to American ingenuity and innovation to use clean new energy technologies to produce energy, cut pollution, protect consumers, create jobs and new income for farmers, and make us less dependent on Middle East oil.

The core of the Bush approach is to allow oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. This misguided plan would sacrifice America's most pristine arctic wilderness for less oil than the United States uses in six months. Bush is catering to the desires of oil companies to open the refuge to drilling, while failing to level with the American public on a key fact -- America cannot drill its way to energy independence.

Instead of opening pristine areas to oil drilling as Bush proposes, Kerry favors concentrating new production in areas already open for development, such as the western and central Gulf of Mexico and the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska.

In ignoring opportunities for conservation and efficiency initiatives, the administration has been cavalier. Cheney has said, "Conservation may be a sign of personal virtue, but it is not a sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy" -- a comment stunning for both its arrogance and its ignorance of the facts.

Kerry has called for significant increases in the efficiency of our cars. Because transportation burns nearly 70 percent of the oil Americans consume and domestic oil drilling is limited, this is the only real path to energy independence.

Homegrown renewable energy produced from the sun, wind and agricultural wastes presents the best opportunity to expand America's energy supply, while cutting pollution. But today, only about 2 percent of our electricity comes from renewable sources.

Kerry is committed to producing 20 percent of America's electricity from renewable resources by the year 2020. This objective will significantly reduce mercury pollution, which has contaminated 80 percent of Minnesota's lakes.

More renewable energy will also benefit our economy. Kerry's policies will create more than 350,000 jobs, according to projections by the Union of Concerned Scientists. In Minnesota alone, his renewable energy plan will provide \$1.7 billion in new capital investment, and \$383 million in payments to farmers and rural landowners producing energy from agricultural wastes and windmills.

Kerry's approach is also popular: 70 percent of Americans favor a similar policy objective. In 2002, a bipartisan group of 58 senators, including Kerry, supported a national standard requiring electric power companies to purchase an increasing amount of electricity produced from renewable energy. The Senate unanimously adopted it in 2003.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration and many of its congressional allies have worked behind closed doors with the Edison Electric Institute, the utility industry's lead lobby organization, to block this boost for renewable energy. The president has done this while ignoring expert analysis from the Energy Information Administration showing that renewable energy could alleviate pressures on natural gas prices that are driving chemical manufacturers offshore and leaving farmers in Minnesota wincing at the cost of fertilizers. Instead, the president and his allies favor building more polluting power plants and worsening mercury pollution from the ones we already have.

This is the essence of the Bush energy approach -- pursuit of short-term objectives that benefit major energy companies, and refusal to level with the American people about what we can and must do on energy. It's not an approach that any of us could justify to our children.

Kerry acknowledges the gravity of the challenges we face. His common-sense plan is predicated on the understanding that new technologies will set us on a favorable economic and environmental path now and in the future. Most important, it is aimed at benefiting all Americans, not only the privileged few.