

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

U.S. presidential candidates paying to pollute but could do more to show green awareness

The Associated Press

Thursday, September 6, 2007

NEW YORK: U.S. presidential candidates are paying an expense beyond their traditional travel and advertising: carbon offsets.

Some candidates in the 2008 race are paying companies to take measures to compensate for the carbon footprint — the emissions produced — of their campaigns. They also are trying to limit activities that contribute to global warming.

But some environmental groups say more could be done by the candidates who still burn countless gallons of jet fuel in canvassing the U.S.

"I believe they don't deserve a pass," said Lisa Finaldi, campaigns director for Greenpeace U.S.

Both Democrat and Republican candidates say they have taken some measures to reduce their carbon footprints, including the use of hybrid or alternative fuel vehicles, recycled paper and energy-efficient practices at their headquarters. Democratic candidates John Edwards, Sen. Chris Dodd, Sen. Joe Biden, Sen. Hillary Clinton and Republican candidates Sen. John McCain, Sen. Sam Brownback, and Mike Huckabee say they would be open to participating in a "green"-themed debate.

The candidates' attention to climate change follows increased concerns by U.S. voters on the issue. A series of recent reports from a U.N. network of 2,000 scientists said that global warming is being caused largely by the accumulation of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere, mostly from human's burning of coal, oil and other fossil fuels.

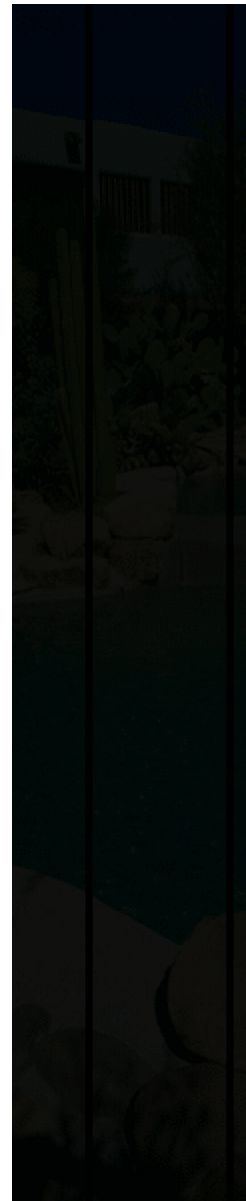
U.S. President George W. Bush refused to join the 1997 Kyoto Protocol — requiring 35 industrial nations to cut their global-warming emissions by 2012 — on grounds that, if adopted by the United States, it would harm the U.S. economy.

After years of arguing that not enough was known about the problem, Bush referred to global warming as an established fact in his State of the Union speech in January, and acknowledged that climate change needed to be addressed.

Recent bills moving through Congress and the Senate have included proposals to raise the fuel efficiency standards of vehicles and promote the use of energy produced from renewable sources.

Some states in the U.S. have passed measures to limit carbon emissions faster than Washington.

Democratic candidates Clinton, Dodd and Edwards have declared "carbon neutral" campaigns, achieved by purchasing offsets — which include the use of renewable energy such as methane and wind — to neutralize the carbon emissions the campaign is producing. However, there are no uniform standards for the growing carbon offset market, making it difficult to measure the results achieved by offset companies.



Candidates recognize that the biggest source of those emissions is typically air travel.

Democrat Sen. Barack Obama uses a charter airline company that adds the price of offsets to his bill, according to how many miles he flies, said Erin Fitzgerald, an Obama campaign spokeswoman.

Other campaigns including that of Sen. John McCain, point out that they try to avoid the use of a private plane. "We fly commercial wherever possible, which greatly reduces our carbon emissions," said Brooke Buchanan, a McCain campaign spokeswoman.

Edward's bill for offsets has been the highest, with the campaign paying a total of \$21,997 (€16,302) to offset provider Native Energy, according to the campaign and Federal Election Commission records. Hillary Clinton was billed \$2,367 (€1,754) by the same provider, according to FEC records from July. Dodd has paid \$650 (€482) to another offset company, Carbonfund, from April to June. Campaigns note that offset payments will continue throughout their run.

Whether it is offset or not, some environmental groups excuse the reliance by campaigns on air travel.

"I think the American public deserves to see the candidates, and that means flying," said Tony Massaro, senior vice president for political affairs and public education at the Washington-based League of Conservation Voters. "There's no other way to do the job," he said.

However, Massaro adds, "in general, we believe all campaigns should be conducted in as green a manner as possible."

As an example of the amount of air travel logged by candidates, Dodd and his staff average a total of 75,000 commercial flight miles (120,000 kilometers) and 4,000 private flight miles (6,400 kilometers) per month, according to Kate Szostak, deputy press secretary for the campaign.

Obama has averaged 16,380 miles (26,360 kilometers) per month on a private plane since his announcement to run in February, Fitzgerald said.

The campaigns of Obama, Dodd, Richardson, Romney, Edwards and Clinton say they recycle trash at their headquarters, where most have an average of 100 staffers. The use of fluorescent bulbs, timers for electronic devices and purchasing of recycled paper are also common practices among the campaigns.

Greenpeace said candidates could improve in a number of areas including keeping their various events on a smaller scale. "These types of activities tend to be very wasteful — it's like a concert," Finaldi said, adding that much could be done to improve the environmental impact of giveaway items by using alternative materials and ink for T-shirts and stickers.

She also said that using a sustainability expert is a "key indicator" that corporations, as well as campaigns, are serious about reducing their impact on the environment. "That's the way to get to it," she said.

The Obama campaign lists a sustainability consultant who is "auditing operations at headquarters and implementing policy and behavior changes," according to the campaign. Those campaigns paying for carbon offsets may receive advice on reducing energy use from the companies they pay.

Campaigns have yet to accept green advice offered from one group of experts, according to Julia Bovey, federal communications director for the National Resources Defense Council Action Fund, a political arm of the environmental group. The fund sent letters to declared or potential candidates in February and has not had one response, she said.

"So many steps can be taken. There's a lot of room for improvement, just by efficiency," Bovey said.

Green groups foresee voters will scrutinize more closely the extent to which campaigns are run in an environmentally friendly way in the future.

"I think by 2012 this will be much more commonplace and eventually the norm," Massaro said. He explained that a future questionnaire from the League of Conservation Voters for congressional candidates will ask what they are doing to run a green campaign.

"As we move forward, I think more of them will be judged on if they walk the talk," Finaldi said.

AP researcher Rhonda Shafner contributed to this report.

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