Congress threatens our rivers, clean air

Over the past year, with the public’s attention focused on the economy, anti-environmental extremists in Congress have quietly launched an all-out attack on the laws that protect Colorado’s rivers, from the South Platte to the Colorado itself—as well as the air we breathe and the places we love.

It’s the most radical, reckless attack on our environment in our lifetimes, and it’s happening under the radar, through provisions slipped into massive budget bills.

191 anti-environment votes

According to U.S. Rep. Henry Waxman, in the House alone, lawmakers have cast an incredible 191 votes on measures that would block the Environmental Protection Agency from keeping our waters clean, making our air safer to breathe, or enforcing other environmental protections.

In February, the House rammed through a budget bill that took aim at our rivers and streams, our air, and funding for national parks. In July the House approved a bill that would gut the Clean Water Act, stripping the EPA of much of its oversight authority. In August, the U.S. House passed a bill containing 39 separate environmental attacks.

Colorado’s congressional delegation includes some consistent environmental supporters, but other representatives have voted the wrong way on nearly every bill.

So far, we’ve blocked the attacks

So far, none of the attacks have become law, with Environment Colorado research, advocacy and grassroots action helping to hold the line.

In 2011, we personally made our case to members of our congressional delegation and their aides. Thousands of our members have also called, emailed or petitioned their lawmakers to reject any bills that threaten our state’s rivers or the quality of our air and protection of our Rocky Mountain landscape.

With the Senate rejecting four of the worst proposals this fall, the tide might be starting to turn. We’ll keep you informed, so you can let your lawmakers know where you stand.

How are they voting?

Find out how your representative in Congress is voting on the environment.

To our members

In the long run, prosperity depends on a healthy environment. It’s hard to imagine feeling very prosperous, after all, without clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and healthy food to eat.

Yet some industries, politicians and even just plain, ordinary folks persist in claiming that we have to choose between a clean environment and a sound economy. Well, call me crazy, but I choose a clean environment. Because clean air, clean water and open spaces matter to me. Because it turns out, time after time, the economic benefits of environmental protection outweigh the short-term costs. And because, in the long run, it’s a no-brainer.

With the support of people like you, we’ll keep standing up against short-sighted industries and politicians.

Thanks for being with us,

Jeanne Bassett
For Environment Colorado

Recent action

Colorado has second most solar jobs nationwide

Across the nation, jobs in the solar energy sector are growing much more rapidly than average industries, according to a Solar Foundation report released by Environment Colorado.

The report, “National Solar Jobs Census 2011: A Review of the U.S. Solar Workforce,” showed that roughly 6,100 Coloradans are employed in the solar industry, ranking the state second in the nation for jobs in this clean energy sector. Only California employs more.

Environment Colorado’s research and advocacy have helped spur solar’s growth in the state, starting with the 2004 Renewable Energy Act. We worked to double the state’s clean energy goal in 2008 and pass the 2010 Clean Air-Clean Jobs Act.

“States like Colorado see solar as one of the cornerstones for our economy now and into the future,” said Wendy Mitchell, chief executive officer of the Aurora Economic Development Council.

54.5 mpg standard nears finish line

In November, the Obama administration officially proposed new clean car standards that represent the biggest step the United States has ever taken to get off oil and tackle global warming.

The standards would require cars and light trucks in model years 2017-2025 to meet fleet-wide average fuel efficiency and global warming pollution standards equivalent to 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025.

The environmental benefits of such a standard are enormous. By 2030, we could save more oil than we imported from Saudi Arabia last year, and slash global warming pollution by an amount equivalent to shutting down 70 coal-fired power plants.
The United States set a new record for weather disasters in 2011. Tornadoes, wildfires and a blistering heat wave were among the 12 disasters costing more than a billion dollars each. This extreme weather has provided a daily reminder of what scientists warn could be “the new normal” as fossil fuel pollution warms our world.

If we want to avoid the worst consequences of global warming, we must dramatically reduce the carbon pollution that we pump into the atmosphere—and soon. Yet Washington is not doing enough, stalled by the influence of Big Oil and the coal industry, and short-term partisan politics in Congress.

**Congress is not the only way**

Fortunately, despite the lack of action in Congress, victories in cities, states and towns across the country are beginning to turn the tide. According to a report we released this fall, we can dramatically reduce global warming emissions through continued state and local action.

The report, “The Way Forward on Global Warming,” shows that policies at the local, state and federal levels can cut the nation’s carbon pollution by 20 percent by 2020 and 34 percent by 2030 from 2008 levels.

Furthermore, according to our study, many policies, including ones that we have championed here in Colorado, have already yielded a reduction of more than 539 million tons of carbon pollution—equivalent to 7 percent of U.S. global warming pollution in 2007. Thanks to such policies as Colorado’s renewable energy law, America’s global warming emissions in 2009 were the lowest they have been since 1995.

**Success begets success**

“When we adopt clean energy policies, people see the environmental and economic benefits, and they value them. That is how we will build the clean energy economy and reduce emissions,” said former Gov. Bill Ritter. Gov. Ritter, who is now the director of the Center for a New Energy Economy at Colorado State University, joined us in releasing our report.

As we’ve seen in Colorado, once clean energy takes root, it becomes even more popular. Homeowners are enjoying the comfort and cost savings of cleaner, more efficient energy systems. Communities are being revitalized as new clean energy industries prosper. Jobs in clean energy are on the rise (see page 2). As a result, the stranglehold that fossil fuel industries have had over our political system is starting to loosen.

Across America, our national federation is waging campaigns that tap into broad public support for clean energy. For example, our sister groups are promoting increases in solar energy, similar to the ones we’ve achieved here, in Arizona, Massachusetts, New York, Minnesota, California, Florida, New Mexico and North Carolina.

The EPA has recently worked on several clean air standards including the Mercury and Air Toxics Standard and the Cross-State Air Pollution Rule. Can you explain what these standards mean for the average American family?

These new Clean Air Act standards mean cleaner, healthier air for American families.

The Mercury and Air Toxics Standards and the Cross-State Air Pollution Rule are part of a series of commonsense steps under the Clean Air Act to reduce emissions of mercury, acid gas, particulate matter, arsenic and other harmful chemicals from some of the biggest polluters in the nation.

These reasonable steps will provide dramatic protections to our children and loved ones—they will save tens of thousands of lives and prevent hundreds of thousands of asthma and heart attacks.

**What’s the best way for our members and supporters to express their opinions on these issues?**

Unfortunately, we are at a point where we have to remind some leaders in Washington to put the health of their constituents above the wish lists of special interests. Speaking directly to those who want to undermine commonsense environmental protections is one of the best ways to stand up for your right to clean air and clean water.
Aspen leads the way with bag ban

More Colorado communities are considering banning wasteful plastic throwaway bags after Aspen voted to ban the bags in October.

Environment Colorado supported the Aspen ban, and our local members emailed Mayor Mick Ireland to urge him to back the move.

Coloradans use 2 billion plastic bags each year. Fewer than 5 percent are recycled. While the bags break down into ever-smaller pieces, they never completely biodegrade. Meanwhile, many of the bags end up in our parks, rivers and streams, where they can entangle or otherwise harm fish and other wildlife.

Basalt, Carbondale and Boulder are among the other cities and towns that have taken, or are considering, action against plastic bags. “Nothing we use for a few minutes should pollute our environment for hundreds of years,” said Environment Colorado’s Jeanne Bassett.

Quick facts

- There are 2 billion disposable plastic bags distributed in Colorado every year.
- Fewer than 5 percent of plastic bags are recycled.
- More than 80 governments, from Bangladesh to Aspen, have taken action to cut plastic pollution by banning disposable plastic bags.