

# A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by  
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## New Energy Bill Benefits the Wrong People

Several months ago, I wrote an article about the energy bill passed by the House of Representatives. Last month, President George W. Bush signed the energy bill into law, the first time by any president in thirteen years. We really needed an energy bill, but perhaps not this one.

This bill, like the House Energy Bill, places emphasis on increasing domestic production of crude oil, natural gas, coal, nuclear and other energy sources in order to reduce our dependence on foreign sources. Fortunately, this \$14.5 billion energy bill would award only 58% of this total to traditional energy industries. And who will benefit from this \$8.4 billion? It would go to the same oil companies earning record profits. Exxon Mobil has already earned a record breaking \$15 billion in profits in just the first half of 2005, and is expected to earn a record \$30 billion for the year. (This same company just donated a whopping \$1 million for the Katrina victims.) During the second quarter of 2005, BP earned a record \$5 billion, and Conoco Phillips earned \$3.1 billion. Why should these companies be given incentives to produce more oil and make more profits? This may be acceptable to some people, but the missing component of the energy bill is emphasis on conservation. As I have stated before, producing more crude oil is *temporary*, but conserving energy is *permanent*. Basically, the energy bill is saying that we can continue to use all the energy we want and the energy companies will somehow make it available to us. This is the wrong message.

In addition to producing more domestic oil, the energy bill provides for the development of renewable energy sources like solar, wind, bio, and an increase in ethanol production as a partial replacement for gas as an automobile fuel. In general, these provisions are very welcome, but I am not sure that ethanol production from corn is very sustainable. A researcher from Cornell University claims that ethanol requires more energy to make than it gives off as fuel. In fact, he claims that it takes 1.3 gallons of oil equivalent to produce one gallon of ethanol. The energy is needed to grow, harvest, transport and distill the corn to convert it to fuel. On the other hand, researchers from Argonne National Laboratory conclude that ethanol contains 26% more energy than what is needed for production. Even if the latter is correct, it is a major effort to gain just 26%.

Instead of providing incentives to produce more oil, the tax breaks and subsidies should go to producing more efficient automobiles. An attempt to require automakers to increase fuel economy is absent from the energy bill. Thirty years ago, the average fuel economy of light vehicles (cars, vans, SUVs, and small pickup trucks) was 13.7 miles per gallon. Through the efforts of the automobile manufacturers, the average fuel economy increased to 22.1 mpg in 1987. Since then it has decreased and is now at 21.0 mpg, the highest it has been since 1994. Despite the technological advances by the automakers, in the past 18 years the fuel consumption of these vehicles has decreased. The primary reason for this phenomenon is the proliferation of SUVs. In the 1980's, light trucks (vans, SUVs and small pickup trucks) accounted for about 20% of all light vehicles, but

account for about 50% in 2005. We could eliminate the need of importing oil from the Middle East just by increasing the fuel efficiency of our automobiles by five miles per gallon. If the automakers just met the CAFE (Corporate Average Fuel Economy) standards that were established by U.S. EPA in 1975, we would be in great shape. The CAFE standard has been 27.5 mpg since 1985, and since then the automakers have been paying huge fines. Since they are profitable by selling these large vehicles, paying the fines is acceptable, and General Motors and Ford are the only two companies making payments.

Many critics have commented on the lax standards for automobiles, so the Bush administration just proposed making some changes to the fuel efficiency requirements for light vehicles. This bill would affect small pickup trucks, minivans, and SUVs. Using a complicated formula to determine the category of the vehicle, fuel efficiency must improve between now and 2011. However, large vehicles like the Hummer remain exempt from these requirements. The total savings in fuel by 2011 would be about 2%, which is not going to make a dent in our reliance on foreign oil.

The Bush administration just doesn't get it. We MUST implement technologies that will enhance fuel efficiency, and these technologies are currently available. Money should be allocated to something as simple as synchronizing traffic signals. This would improve fuel efficiency, reduce emissions, reduce travel times, eliminate congestion and reduce stress. We need to overcome Detroit's reluctance to manufacture more fuel-efficient automobiles. When people stop buying the large SUVs, minivans and pickup trucks, the U.S. automakers won't have anything else to sell that will be profitable.

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