Bush Budget Slashes Environment, Funds Nuclear Development

WASHINGTON, DC, February 5, 2007 (ENS) - President George W. Bush today sent Congress a $2.9 trillion budget package for the fiscal year starting in October that includes big increases for defense spending, cuts in conservation programs and assumptions that tax revenues will increase and that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge will be leased for oil and gas development.

Yet the administration said reducing U.S. dependence on petroleum imports and expanding incentives for clean energy technologies are central to the President's energy budget proposal.

As part of $24.3 billion funding request for the Energy Department, the president is asking Congress to provide $2.7 billion to accelerate research into power generation technologies based on coal, nuclear energy and renewable sources, as well as the development of efficient vehicles and biofuels.

"This budget builds on our commitment to strengthen our nation’s energy security by diversifying our energy resources and reducing our reliance on foreign sources of energy," said Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman.

But while the newly elected Congress now controlled by Democrats generally
supports reducing dependence on foreign oil and increases in renewable energy sources, some parts of the president's budget are in for a rough ride.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada today took aim at the budget's half-billion dollar proposal to develop the nation's only high-level nuclear waste repository already approved by the President for Yucca Mountain, Nevada 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

"Rather than sending Congress a budget that strengthens homeland security, energy independence, education, affordable health care and fiscal discipline, the president proposes nearly a half-billion dollars for the nuclear waste dump at Yucca Mountain," said Reid. "The proposed dump is a project whose time has passed. As majority leader of the Senate, I promise the highest Congressional scrutiny for this waste of taxpayer dollars."

The president is requesting $114 million to support the planned expansion of the U.S. nuclear power industry and $405 million for the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership, GNEP. Under this program, the United States would build a nuclear fuel reprocessing facility and sell fuel for nuclear reactors to nations that do not have the technology to manufacture their own nuclear fuel.

In 2006, the administration asked for $250 million for the GNEP but lawmakers expressed doubts about the feasibility, the timeline and other aspects of the program.

Senate Energy Committee Chairman Jeff Bingaman, a New Mexico Democrat, said he is puzzled that the increase sought for spent fuel reprocessing as part of the GNEP funding is larger than the entire proposed research and development budget for solar energy.

Bingaman welcomed the increases proposed by the administration for biomass and biofuels research and development programs but criticized the elimination of all research related to oil and natural gas and a lack of funding for geothermal research.

The budget would fund expansion of the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve over 20 years to more than double its current capacity of 727 million barrels.

The president’s proposal calls for $385 million to fund coal-based clean power generation projects such as the near-zero emission coal power project FutureGen and large-scale carbon sequestration field tests.

Advanced coal technologies will help the United States tap its huge coal reserves at reasonable cost without adding to greenhouse gas emissions, the administration said.
Senator Barbara Boxer, a California Democrat who chairs the Environment and Public Works Committee today expressed disappointment in the president's budget for failing to set the right priorities for the American people and obscuring the true costs of the war in Iraq.

"The American people voted for change last November, but instead of listening to them, the president is giving us more of the same - a blank check for this endless war and penny-pinching for critical domestic priorities like education, health care, energy independence, support for local law enforcement, and combating the threat of global warming," said Boxer.

The Energy Department is seeking loan guarantee authority to provide $9 billion in financial backing for projects related to commercialization of more efficient biofuel production, advanced nuclear energy, and more efficient electricity transmission.

In addition, $4.4 billion would go toward basic research in the physical sciences and bioenergy and nanotechnology research programs that carry a longer-term promise of improvements in energy use.

But at the same time, the president's 2008 budget proposes a 40 percent cut, a $98 million reduction, to the Weatherization Assistance Program, which conserves energy by helping low-wage workers and retirees on fixed incomes to insulate their homes.

In 2005, President Bush stated his commitment to increase funding for the Weatherization Assistance Program by $1.4 billion over the next 10 years in order to cut the utility bills of 1.2 million low-income families while conserving energy.

(PHOTO COURTESY THE WHITE HOUSE)

National Community Action Foundation Executive Director David Bradley said the administration's plan unwisely elects energy experimentation over conservation.

"The administration is proposing that all new energy resources go into research and development of new technologies for the future. We certainly need new breakthroughs, yet it is not wise to invest only in risky, long-range experiments and neglect more immediate and proven home energy-saving upgrades," Bradley said. Reducing energy use is the cheapest way for society to ease the demand for fuels."

New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton expressed disappointment that the budget cuts $44 million from clean water funding. She said the cuts slash funding by 36 percent to the revolving loan fund that cities and towns across New York rely on for funding to make improvements to sewer and wastewater treatment facilities.

There is a $9 million cut in research funding to the National Cancer Institute, and a $4 million cut to the National Institutes of Environmental Health Sciences.
The most important environmental priority for the 110th Congress is the enactment of strong global climate change legislation - specifically, legislation that caps emissions of carbon dioxide and the other heat-trapping gases that are released through combustion of fossil fuels said a coalition of 21 national and regional environmental groups, introducing their Green Budget last week.

Amtrak train pulls into a Wisconsin station. (Photo courtesy Wisconsin DOT)

"Investing in the modernization of our country’s transportation infrastructure is critical to combating global climate change, whether by developing efficient and effective public transportation or passenger rail (one of the most fuel efficient forms of transportation using less energy per passenger-mile than most airplane and automobile travel), or by increasing the efficiency of car engines," the environmental groups said.

But the president's budget proposal makes deep cuts to Amtrak funding to $900 million in 2008 from $1.3 billion estimated for 2007. This 83 percent cut jeopardizes Amtrak’s ability to serve many of its passenger lines and removes an alternative to automotive transportation fueled by gasoline and diesel.

**Natural Resources Funding Cuts**

In total, the president's budget cuts appropriated funding for natural resources and the environment by nearly $1.5 billion, a 4.8 percent cut.

Director Rob Portman of the Office of Management and Budget presents the budget of the U.S. government for the 2008 fiscal year to the press. (Photo by Paul Morse courtesy The White House)

Briefing the media today, Rob Portman, director of the White House Office of Management and Budget attempted to introduce as "new" a plan to get the private sector to invest in the National Park System that was in fact introduced last August.

"We are proposing today an exciting new plan, called the National Parks Centennial Initiative," said Portman. "This new program will provide up to $3 billion over the next 10 years in new federal and private spending to help achieve new levels of excellence in our national parks."

But on August 25, 2006, the 90th anniversary of the National Park Service, Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne launched the "National Parks Centennial Challenge," a 10 year initiative to improve the Park System in time for its 100th anniversary in 2016 by selling private companies the right to name trails or other park facilities.

Conservationists raised an outcry today over cuts to programs that protect land, water and wildlife.
The budget figures for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, LWCF, alone show a cut of nearly $85 million below FY 2006 levels, about a 60 percent cut. The fund was established in 1964 to provide money to federal and state governments to purchase land, water and wetlands for the benefit of all Americans. Funded with receipts from oil and gas drilling off the outer continental shelf, the LWCF is authorized to receive $900 million a year.

Already faced with a $2.5 billion budget backlog, the National Wildlife Refuge System received a small increase in the administration's request, but that still leaves the system more than $55 million behind the inflation adjusted 2004 funding level.

"Daily we are seeing reports of the impacts of severe budget shortfalls in the refuge system," said Jamie Rappaport Clark, executive vice president of Defenders of Wildlife, who served as director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service during the Clinton administration.

"Overall, the system is losing a fifth of its staff. Across the country refuges are eliminating active outreach, visitor programs, habitat maintenance, wildlife restoration and education programs. Without more funding the refuge system will not be able to fulfill its vital mission to conserve our nation's fish, wildlife and their habitats for generations to come," said Rappaport Clark.

President Bush's budget also reduces the endangered species recovery program by 7.5 percent for a $5.5 million cut below FY 2006.

In addition, funding for programs that help private landowners conserve at-risk wildlife were zeroed out. This cut to the Landowner Incentive and Private Stewardship Grants programs totals $29 million.

"Programs that protect our nation's lands and wildlife are in structural collapse," said Clark. "We urge the new Congress to begin to reinvest in all critical lands and wildlife conservation programs, including those in the farm bill, so that we can leave a true conservation legacy for our children and grandchildren."

Despite the president’s new goal of reducing U.S. gasoline usage by 20 percent in the next 10 years, the president’s budget reverts to old, dirty energy and assumes that the Arctic Refuge's Coastal Plain will be leased to oil companies for $7 billion, warned the "Green Budget" environmental groups.

The budget proposes a $5.8 million boost in funding for the Bureau of Land Management oil and gas program – from $115,308 million appropriated in FY 2007 to $121,191 million requested for FY 2008 – but does not mention the BLM’s National Landscape Conservation System.
Mountains. (Photo courtesy U.S. Forest Service)

In addition, BLM’s wildlife program shows a slight decline, making it unclear how the administration proposes to fund its new $15 million Healthy Lands Initiative.

"The Healthy Lands initiative is a tacit acknowledgement of the havoc wreaked by the administration’s oil and gas policies, but what we really need is a halt to new oil and gas leasing on sensitive lands, and adherence to protective wildlife stipulations on the leases that have already been issued," said The Wilderness Society's Senior Policy Advisor Dave Alberswerth.

On a positive note, the environmental groups approved a budget increase for the National Park System of $258 million, 14.3 percent, over requested fiscal year 2006 levels.

"The increased National Park Service funding is a step in the right direction," said The Wilderness Society’s Kristen Brengel. "The funding would add nearly 500 permanent employees and several thousand seasonal employees. More rangers mean that parks visitors will experience these places in the way they were meant to, through ranger-led tours and active natural and cultural resource protection."

For the second consecutive year, the President’s Forest Service budget includes a proposal to sell off up to $800 million of National Forest lands. Although the full details of the land sale proposal are not yet available, there is every indication that it is nearly identical to the proposal made last February that would have sold up to 300,000 acres of National Forest lands across 35 states.

The budget also once again proposes to sell up to 950 million acres of BLM lands to raise $334 million over 10 years.

Similar Forest Service and BLM proposals announced last year met with strong and widespread opposition from hunters, anglers, locally-elected officials, businesses, governors, and both Democratic and Republican Members of Congress.

The U.S. Forest Service's timber sale program helps fund schools in rural counties. Bob Douglas, president, of the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition, a group of 1,100 organizations, representing 37 states. Douglas also serves as county superintendent of schools, Tehama County, California. He said the president's budget proposal is inadequate to keep rural schools operating.

Bob Douglas is president of the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition and County Superintendent of Schools, Tehama County, California. (Photo courtesy Forest Counties Payments Committee)

Douglas says, "Although we appreciate that the
administration has included a funding mechanism in the budget proposal that would partially fund the Secure Rural Schools and Communities Act for four years, our real and immediate priority is to obtain passage of a one-year extension of the Act so we can rationally discuss a long-term, bipartisan solution with the administration and Congress."

"Frankly," Douglas said, "if we cannot get that commitment now, local governments will start sending out pink slips to between 12,000 and 16,000 teachers and county employees as early as March 15th. In our most rural counties, these layoffs will have a devastating effect on the quality of our schools and the level of county services. Some local school districts will be forced to declare bankruptcy."

"We are truly facing an emergency of catastrophic proportions in our 800 forest counties and 4,400 forest county school districts. Without urgent action, over nine million forest county children will feel the effects of federal inaction."