GOP's Claims about Obama Puzzle Environmentalists

BETH FOUHY - Associated Press - Associated Press

Mitt Romney says President Barack Obama blocked construction of the Keystone XL oil pipeline as a gift to environmentalists. Newt Gingrich calls Obama "President Algae" for supporting research on biofuels. And Rick Santorum says Obama's environmental views constitute a "phony theology" that prioritizes the earth over people.

The leading Republican presidential hopefuls have cast Obama as environmental extremist whose policies have put him out of touch with the needs of ordinary Americans. It's a characterization that may resonate with GOP primary voters, but it has surprised environmental activists, many of whom say they are let down by Obama's record on their issues.

"The environmental movement has been at odds with Barack Obama for much of his three years in the White House," said Bill McKibben, founder of the environmental group 350.org. "The president is very much in the center — far too much in the center for many environmentalists."

As a candidate, Obama's pledge to limit the gases that contribute to global warming and embrace cleaner forms of energy pleased many environmental activists. But nearing the end of his first term, Obama's record on the environment is mixed — and many of his decisions have irked the very activists who Republicans suggest have broad sway over administration policies.

"Absolutely, he has been a disappointment," said Frank O'Donnell, president of the environmental group Clean Air Watch. "When Obama was elected, I think public health and environmental advocates thought a number of unresolved problems would be dealt in short order. And we learned that environmental protection did not prove to be a first-tier activity for the White House."

Some Obama actions have cheered environmentalists. He successfully ushered in historic increases in fuel economy standards for automobiles as well as the first-ever regulations on heat-trapping gases blamed for global warming and on toxic mercury pollution from power plants. He has invested heavily in cleaner forms of energy; the U.S. produces more energy from alternative sources such as wind, solar and biofuels now than it has at any point in history.

But Obama failed to persuade a Democratic Congress to pass promised legislation limiting carbon emissions. He abandoned the legislative effort entirely after Republicans gained control of the House in the 2010 elections.

And in a move that deeply angered environmentalists, the president in September

scrubbed a plan to set a stricter health standard on lung-damaging smog, sticking with one set by his GOP predecessor George W. Bush that scientists say is too weak.

For the GOP presidential candidates, it all amounts to a zealous pursuit of policies that have slowed the nation's economic recovery.

In his appeal to evangelical voters, Santorum has framed Obama's environmentalism as "phony theology" — a belief espoused by many Christian conservatives that environmental activism places nature above man and promotes veneration of the earth instead of God.

Recently, Santorum, Romney and Gingrich have cast the rising cost of gasoline, currently averaging about $3.88 a gallon, as a consequence of Obama's decisions to limit oil drilling in environmentally sensitive areas. However, U.S. oil production is unrelated to gasoline prices, given that oil is a global commodity, and factors that influence gasoline prices are generally beyond the control of a president or a nation.

In Louisiana on Wednesday, Santorum blamed Obama's "radical energy policy" for slowing oil production on federal lands and off the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

"The underlying reason is because he believes in man-made global warming," Santorum said of Obama. The former Pennsylvania senator has dismissed climate change as "political science" despite a broad consensus among climate scientists that human activity has contributed to a warming of the earth.

Gingrich has made the price of gasoline the central tenet of his sputtering candidacy, insisting he will bring gas prices down to $2.50 a gallon if elected.

"This is a very anti-fossil fuels administration. The left wing environmental movement hates oil," Gingrich said recently at a campaign stop in Alabama.

Romney has called on Obama to fire his "gas hike trio" — Romney's term for Energy Secretary Steven Chu, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Environmental Protection Agency chief Lisa Jackson.

And Romney has chided Obama for his interest in renewable energy. "You can't drive a car with a windmill on it," the former Massachusetts governor told a campaign audience in Ohio earlier this month.

In fact, Obama has walked a fine line with environmentalists on energy.

Many cheered when he decided to reject the Keystone XL oil pipeline after widespread protests from environmental groups. But his administration is now pledging to fast-track a smaller segment of the pipeline to bring oil from Cushing, Okla., to the Gulf Coast, to environmentalists' dismay.

Obama has drawn praise from environmentalists for instituting a temporary moratorium on deep-water drilling after the massive BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico last spring. But he is pushing more oil and gas drilling in part because of high fuel

prices and has recently given approval to Shell to drill in the Arctic Ocean — a step that environmental groups have been fighting for years.

Obama has also given a guarded endorsement of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, even as the EPA and Interior Department are pursuing several new regulations on the controversial drilling practice to extract natural gas and oil from shale rock.

Obama has pleased environmentalists with improvements in energy efficiency, fuel economy and investment in clean-energy technologies. But he has infuriated many by embracing nuclear energy as part of a so-called clean-energy standard.

"This administration has expanded drilling in the Arctic, has delayed protections from smog, and at the same time done more for clean energy and to cut oil consumption than any administration ever," said Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club. "By our view, that's a combination of wins and losses, or advances and retreats, that shows a pragmatic and moderate record."

Cappiello reported from Washington. AP Religion Writer Rachel Zoll contributed to this report.

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