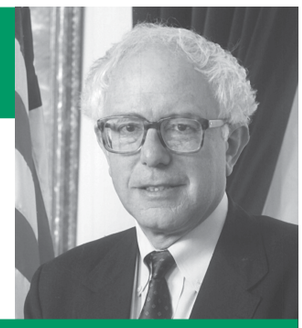
U.S. Representative

Bernie Sanders

A Special Focus on Environmental Issues



Summer 2002

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Fellow Vermonter,

Knowing your interest in environmental issues, I wanted to take this opportunity to keep you informed about some of the important developments that are currently taking place in Washington. As one of the members of Congress recently awarded a 100% pro-environment voting record score by USPIRG, I look forward to working with you to address some of the environmental crises that we face, and to ensure we leave this planet in better condition than we found it.

September 11 made many of us more conscious than ever about this country's absurd national energy policies. Today, we import more fossil fuel from the Mid-East than ever before and, in the process, provide tens of billions of dollars a year to non-democratic governments. Not only does our reliance on fossil fuels contribute to air pollution, acid rain and global warming, but it even provides funding for terrorists who wish to do our country harm.

In my view, we must radically revamp our energy strategy and move to safe, sustainable energies sources such as wind, biomass, and solar and aggressively deploy technologies such as cogeneration and fuel cells. These are practical and cost effective technologies which can and must be utilized today. That is why I have introduced the most sweeping energy legislation in Congress which would move this country in a completely new direction.

It is my hope that Vermont will lead the nation in new energy policies – including weatherization, energy conservation and sustainable energy. I am happy to report that one of the outgrowths of the major energy conference that my office sponsored last October in Burlington has been a closer working relationship between people and companies that are working on wind energy. The good news is that there are now a half dozen or so projects in Vermont that are planning to construct wind turbines in the near future. My goal is that in ten years we can produce 20% of our state's electricity from wind turbines.

I must express my continued disappointment with the Bush Administration's environmental record. Whether it has been their energy policy written by and for the fossil fuel-based industry, vacillations on global warming, efficiency standards for automobiles and trucks, drilling for oil in ANWR, acid rain produced in the Mid West, or arsenic in our drinking water, the President and his administration have been consistently wrong on most of the major environmental issues facing this country.

I hope you find this newsletter informative. As always, I welcome your views and questions on the issues of the day. If my office can be of assistance, ***please contact my Burlington office at 802-862-0697 or 800-339-9834 or my Washington office at 202-225-4115.*** You can also contact me through my website at ***bernie.house.gov*** which is frequently updated and contains much information about the environment as well as other issues.

Sincerely yours,

Bernie

Bernard Sanders
U.S. Congressman

Agriculture and the Environment

How we organize agricultural production and the types of products we grow are critical to our efforts to protect the environment and the health of consumers. Unfortunately, as in so many other parts of our economy, large multinational corporations increasingly control American agriculture. This has led to the rapid decline of the family farm, suburban sprawl, pesticide-laden food and the creation of environmentally unsound factory farms.

I am proud of the role my office played – and the role the entire Vermont delegation played – during consideration of this year's Farm Bill. Despite overwhelming odds, the Vermont delegation successfully led an effort to establish a new dairy program that is targeted to family-run farms. By preserving family-based agriculture, we will keep land open throughout the country and prevent the environmental harm done by huge operations with thousands of cows in a single place.

While there are many aspects of the Farm Bill that I did not support, the legislation did increase funding for conservation programs by 80% over the 1996 Farm Bill. This will significantly enhance soil and water protection throughout the country.

In my view, we need to increase our efforts to move our agricultural system toward sustainable, organic production that does not rely on chemicals or Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) which are increasingly pervasive in our food supply.

Energy: Vermont Can Lead The Nation

Our lack of a sound national energy policy is a disaster. We waste huge amounts of energy. This situation might make sense for the oil companies, OPEC, and private electric companies who make profits by selling us more and more energy. But it makes no sense for consumers or the environment.

President Bush would make matters worse, by drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). Even the government admits that we couldn't get any oil from ANWR for the next ten years, and a government study estimated that only 3.2 billion barrels of oil could be economically recovered – enough to fuel our vehicles for a mere 6 months.

Instead, we need to implement a policy to increase energy conservation and efficiency and move to renewable energy sources.

Vermont is already making real progress in energy conservation and, as a result, home electricity use in our state is down by 12% since the 1980s. Vermonters have saved a substantial amount of energy, cut their electric bills, and protected the environment. In Burlington, the average residential customer now uses 25% ***less*** electricity than in 1989 and is paying $140 dollars a year less in real dollars. Statewide, Vermont created an efficiency utility, which, unlike private utilities whose interest is in selling more electricity, has the job of investing in our homes and businesses to save energy and money. So far, in less than two years, Efficiency Vermont has reached about 15% of the state's users, investing in efficiency improvements that cost an average of 2.5 cents per kilowatt-hour – about half of what it costs to generate electricity – and which will save almost $40 million.

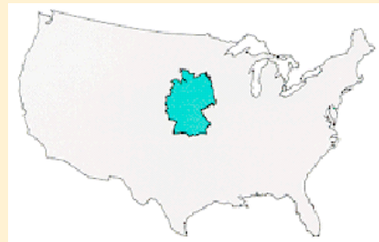
Vermont is also making progress in the use of alternative energy. In Searsburg, Green Mountain Power erected 11 wind turbines that are producing six megawatts of power – enough to power over 2,000 homes. In Burlington, the McNeil plant is generating cost-effective electricity in one of the largest biomass facilities in the country, and can be even more efficient when a district energy system uses its waste heat in local buildings.

To extend these efforts, I am pushing for the following national initiatives:

Renewable energy

Our growing dependency on imported oil is dangerous to our economy, our national security, and our health. We must increase our use of wind, solar and biomass by providing tax credits and rebates to consumers who use these local, sustainable sources of energy. These sources are far more cost-effective and environmentally sound than drilling in the arctic, off the coast of Florida, and under the Great Lakes.

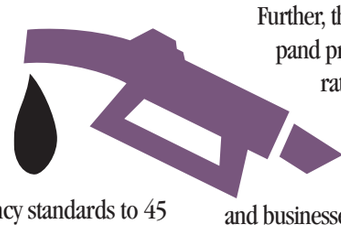
Windpower is the fastest growing source of new power in the US and throughout the world. In my opinion, and that of experts, wind can provide 20% of Vermont's electricity in a decade. My office secured $1 million for the Washington Electric Coop for large-scale wind development in central Vermont, and is working to get federal support for other projects throughout the state.



Although only 1/20 the area of the U.S., Germany's installed capacity of 6,400 MW of wind power is 40% more than that of the continental United States. They decided to phase out nuclear power and encouraged wind power. Wind now provides 3.5% of Germany's total energy use.

Transportation efficiency

Instead of increasing each year, the fuel economy of new passenger vehicles is actually at a 20-year low. Because Congress has not updated our standards since 1975, technology improvements that, according to the EPA, could have increased fuel economy by 20% have instead gone into higher power and larger vehicles. Then, light trucks were only 20% of the market; now they account for 50%.



According to the U.S. Public Interest Research Group, raising fuel efficiency standards to 45 miles per gallon, phased in over ten years, would save us $80 billion at the pump, 1.3 billion gallons of oil, and over 1.5 trillion pounds of greenhouse gases, every year.

In surveys, Americans, including the owners of large vehicles, support higher fuel efficiency standards. But just this March, incredibly, the Senate rejected increasing fuel economy standards. Even worse, they voted to exempt all pick-up trucks from any standards. We have to galvanize the public to turn these disastrous policies around.

Right now we need to set an energy course that saves money, restores our environmental health, and enhances the competitiveness of our economy and our national security. Even the President now admits that our fossil fuel use is causing global warning, but he proposes no actions to stop and reverse this calamity. The U.S. has the technology and the resources to end our reliance on fossil fuels. The only question that remains is whether Big Oil wins out over the needs of Vermonters and all Americans.

Building efficiency

We have to seriously invest in energy efficiency and conservation, including home weatherization. Through weatherization, a typical Vermont family saves over $200 in winter heating bills every year. But more than 20 million homes are still waiting for weatherization services.

Further, the federal government should expand programs like "Energy Star" that rates the energy efficiency of household appliances and office equipment. Through tax credits and rebates, we can make our homes and businesses 30% to 50% more energy efficient, saving consumers $11 billion a year in energy costs.

Got Asthma?

Electricity generation is our nation's single largest source of air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, causing acid rain, smog, mercury contamination, and global climate change.

The human health impacts are enormous. The report "Power to Kill," released last summer by the Clean Air Task Force, indicated that in Vermont alone, up to 276 asthma attacks and up to 13 deaths are caused by these dirty plants each year!

When the Clean Air Act was enacted in 1970, the oldest, dirtiest power plants were exempted since they were to be replaced by newer, cleaner plants. But many of them are still in use, producing up to 10 times the pollution of modern plants.

The law did require plants to upgrade pollution controls to modern standards when other major changes are made, but the EPA and Justice Department say owners have ignored the law. According to the Clean Air Task Force report, enforcing the law could reduce the particulates (soot) by 70 percent, which in Vermont alone could avoid between 138 and 220 asthma attacks, and 6 to 10 deaths from asthma each year.

Vermont and other states have sued 17 plants for violating the Clean Air Act. I fully support these suits, and along with other members of Congress have asked the Administration to continue federal support for the lawsuits.

But President Bush, who, two years ago, assured Vermonters that he would "absolutely" close the dirty smokestack loophole, has since proposed a so-called energy plan that would undermine that effort.

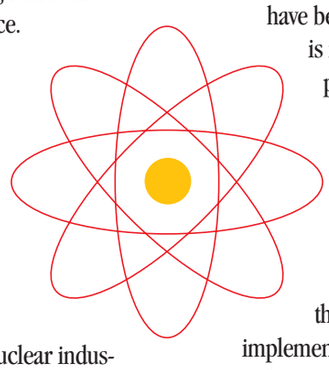
Worse, as I write this, the Administration is proposing rules that would gut the law that requires those plants to clean up. In light of the ongoing health consequences, it would be an outrage if these new rules are allowed to go into effect. I will do everything I can to help Vermont ensure that the polluters and the Administration obey the Clean Air Act.

As in previous years, I am an original co-sponsor of "The Clean Smokestacks Act" which would cost-effectively clean up over-polluting power plants. This law would also reduce greenhouse gas emissions as called for in the Rio Convention, the international climate change treaty negotiated under the former Bush Administration and ratified by the Senate.

Nuclear Power: Waste and Insecurity

Nuclear Power

When nuclear power was sold to the American public decades ago, the industry promised energy that would be "too cheap to meter." Even more tragic than that broken promise was that they had no safe way to get rid of the incredibly toxic and long-lasting radioactive waste that the reactors produce. And they still don't.



The result is that at 131 sites around the country, the high-level waste is building up, storage space is running out, and there is no consensus, even among the experts, on what to do with it.

Incredibly, in spite of the radioactive waste crisis, the nuclear industry and the Bush administration want more nuclear plants. This is clearly not the way for our nation to go. My view is that nuclear power is inherently unsafe, generates vast quantities of radioactive waste that will threaten human health for tens of thousands of years, and subjects us to very real security threats from terrorist actions targeted at nuclear facilities. The sensible course is to phase out nuclear power and replace the 20% of our electric power (about 10% of out total energy) it provides with much cleaner and safer energy sources such as wind, solar, and biomass.

Yucca Mountain

As you know, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has proposed transporting 77,000 metric tons of highly radioactive spent fuel waste across 43 states from 2010 to 2033 and store it at Yucca Mountain, Nevada.

There are numerous reasons for concern about this plan, among them: 1.The U.S. Nuclear Waste Technical Review Board, created by Congress in 1987 to provide an independent assessment of the Yucca Mountain project, declared that "the technical basis for the DOE's repository performance estimates is weak to moderate at this time." 2. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has identified 293 unresolved environmental and health problems. 3. A preliminary General Accounting Office report stated that the DOE "is unlikely to achieve its goal of opening a repository at Yucca Mountain by 2010 and has no reliable estimate of when, and at what cost, such a repository could be opened." At best, based on the available science, we just don't know if Yucca Mountain facility will be safe. At worst, it could be an environmental and health disaster.

In voting against the federal government imposing the high-level nuclear waste storage site on the state of Nevada, my concern was not just the hundreds of unresolved environmental and health issues; or Yucca's geological questions; or the dangers of transporting nuclear waste thousands of miles across the country. Equally important is the fact that, even if the project does everything the government says it will do, after almost 40 years of shipments, when Yucca is filled to planned capacity, there would be virtually ***the same amount of nuclear waste stored on-site at reactors all across the country as there is today***. After all that added risk, nothing would have been accomplished because there is no plan to phase out nuclear power and stop the generation of new high-level waste.

The alternative to Yucca must not be inaction. Instead, a comprehensive action plan should be implemented immediately. First, we must "turn off the faucet" of radioactive waste by implementing a responsible energy strategy emphasizing conservation, energy efficiency and a strong move to sustainable and safe energy sources. Second, the federal government must take full responsibility for the high-level waste we have already created by greatly enhancing protection of spent fuel and reactors from natural disasters and potential security threats. Finally, we must complete the unfinished technical analyses of sites like Yucca and develop a scientifically sound plan, so that after its implementation there is no waste left in Vermont or anywhere else around the country.

Security Threats

As a result of the tragic events of September 11, there is good reason for concern about the security of nuclear power plants across the country. The National Journal recently reported that U.S. intelligence agencies have collected evidence that al Qaeda has trained terrorists to conduct guerrilla attacks on commercial nuclear plants. To address these concerns, I hosted a Congressional Town Meeting in Brattleboro to discuss security at the nearby Vermont Yankee Nuclear Plant. Two weeks before the September 11th attacks, Vermont Yankee failed a mock terrorist drill. Yankee Nuclear received the lowest safety marks of any nuclear plant in the country. And during the past several years, over half the nuclear plants in the country have failed mock terrorist attacks organized by the NRC.

At that meeting, I invited representatives from federal and state agencies to address concerned citizens from neighboring communities about security at the plant. The assurances offered by the officials did not convince me that enough is being done to protect the public from this danger. Shortcomings in security range from inadequate protection of the nuclear plant itself and the spent fuel, to inadequate and probably unworkable evacuation plans for the surrounding area, particularly for the schools.

That is why I cosponsored the Nuclear Security Act (H.R. 3382), which would improve safety at nuclear power plants by creating uniform federal security standards, federalizing all nuclear power plant security personnel, requiring potassium iodide pills to be stockpiled and distributed, expand evacuation zones around nuclear plants, and strengthen the security drills performed at nuclear facilities. It is my hope that in the very near future Congress will come together on this issue and pass this important and desperately needed legislation.

STAR Graduate Fellowship Program

The Science To Achieve Results graduate fellowship program is a highly successful and respected program to educate new scientists in environmental research. Yet the Bush Administration would eliminate the STAR fellowships, undermining EPA's efforts to attract and train researchers in environmental sciences. These scientists are vital to the nation's environmental protection efforts carried out by governments, academia, business and communities. I have joined with other members of Congress to strongly object to the elimination of funding for this program and will continue to fight for its preservation.

Clean Water Enforcement

The Clean Water Enforcement and Compliance Act of 2002 will improve oversight and accountability under the Clean Water Act, which was passed thirty years ago to restore and maintain the integrity of the nation's waters. Despite the Act's mandate, more than 40% of our nation's waters are still not fit for fishing and swimming! The primary reason is inadequate enforcement. I was an original cosponsor of this bill because I think we must redouble our efforts to clean and protect our nation's waters, not to gut the Clean Water Act.

This bill sets mandatory fines for facilities that repeatedly violate the law and ensures that any economic benefits resulting from violations of the Act are recovered. It also opens records about facilities' performance to the public, provides notices of polluted waters, mandates inspections for repeat offenders of the Act, and requires applicants for discharges to submit pollution prevention plans that detail how they will reduce their pollution.

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If you receive more than one copy of this newsletter, we apologize. Please feel free to pass the extra copy along to an interested friend.
This mailing was prepared, published, and mailed at taxpayer expense.

Genetically Engineered Foods

In recent years there has been an explosion in the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Today, more than 50% of U.S.-produced soybeans are GMOs, more than 30% of U.S.-produced corn is grown from GMO seeds and, overall, more than 25% of total U.S. cropland now grows genetically engineered crops. In fact, GMO crops can now produce their own pesticides and herbicides. GMO technology can create fish that grow much larger and produce more edible product. In pharmaceutical research, GMO technology is now being used get animals to excrete vital ingredients for new pharmaceuticals.

We as a nation and as a planet need to have a far more in-depth discussion about the long-term implications of this technology. We need much more understanding about the impact of genetically-engineered crops on health and food safety, the environment and other matters of great ethical significance. Congress has been very slow to respond – and those agencies responsible for protecting the health of our people and the well-being of our environment have been negligent in addressing the long-term effects of this technology.

Quite incredibly, companies are allowed to market GMOs with only minimal evidence of their safety. The FDA has ruled that GMOs are equivalent to naturally-occurring plants, so GMO foods do not have to be labeled or undergo health trials. EPA and USDA only require minimal field tests of GMO crops – none of which explore the long-term consequences of introducing GMOs into the environment.

For these reasons, I am an original cosponsor of five bills designed to address this very important issue. These would:

1. Require food companies to label all foods that contain or are produced with GMO's. Consumers have a right to know and choose what is in their food.
2. Require all GMO foods to follow FDA's food additive process to ensure that they are safe for human consumption.
3. Establish a clear set of farmers' rights with regard to GMO crops. These crops have involved great abuse of farmers, including loss of markets, unreasonable seed contracts, intrusion into farm operations, and increased liability.
4. Place all liability from negative impacts of GMO's on the biotech companies who create and profit from them.
5. Begin several new initiatives to help end hunger in developing nations. While technology may play a role in feeding more of the world's people, political and economic conditions remain the greatest obstacles to ending world hunger.

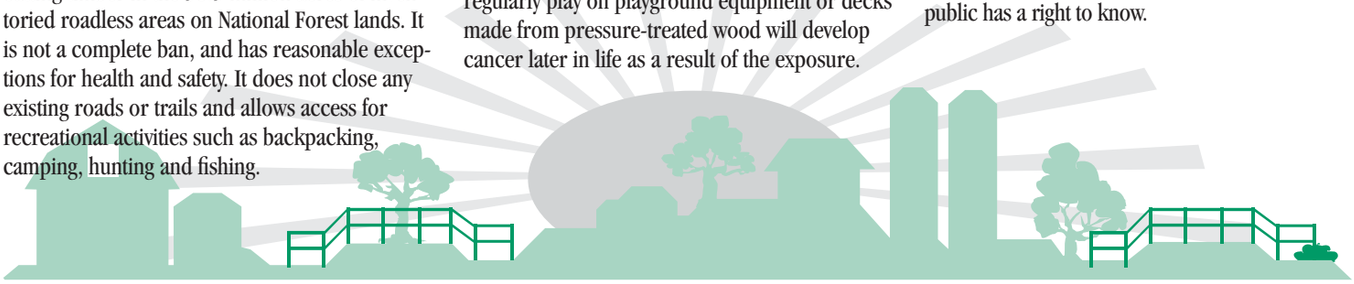
National Forest Roadless Area Conservation

The Roadless Area Conservation Act of 2002 would give the force of law to a Forest Service rule drafted with the most public input in the agency's history. 1.6 million people commented, the vast majority in support of strong protection of our nation's remaining pristine forests. The bill is necessary because, although the Bush Administration had pledged to uphold the Roadless Areas Conservation Rule, it has recently moved to significantly weaken it.

The rule prohibits road construction and cutting timber in the 58.5 million acres of inventoried roadless areas on National Forest lands. It is not a complete ban, and has reasonable exceptions for health and safety. It does not close any existing roads or trails and allows access for recreational activities such as backpacking, camping, hunting and fishing.

Arsenic Treated Lumber

I am an original cosponsor of a bill to phase out the use of arsenic in pressure treated lumber and ensure that arsenic treated lumber is disposed of safely. Most of the lumber sold for outdoor use in the U.S. – including that used for school playgrounds and decks of private homes – is treated with toxins to preserve the wood from rot and insects. The most commonly used chemical is chromated copper arsenate (CCA), which is 22 percent arsenic, a potent toxin and carcinogen. According to a study by the Environmental Working Group and Healthy Building Network, an estimated one out of every 500 children who regularly play on playground equipment or decks made from pressure-treated wood will develop cancer later in life as a result of the exposure.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory Act

This bill establishes a comprehensive, mandatory greenhouse gas inventory, registry and information system to encourage emissions reductions. Despite the fact that the U.S. committed through the United Nations Framework on Climate Change to stabilize emissions at 1990 levels, they have increased 13.6% between 1990 and 2000. Greenhouse gas reporting and tracking would encourage significant reductions by helping industry set internal targets. It would also provide accurate reporting of at least 90% of the country's sources of greenhouse gas emissions, information I think the public has a right to know.