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When Cleaner Air Is a Biblical Obligation

By [MICHAEL JANOFFSKY](#)

WASHINGTON, Nov. 6 - In their long and frustrated efforts pushing Congress to pass legislation on global warming, environmentalists are gaining a new ally.

With increasing vigor, evangelical groups that are part of the base of conservative support for leading Republicans are campaigning for laws that would reduce carbon dioxide emissions, which scientists have linked with global warming.

In the latest effort, the National Association of Evangelicals, a nonprofit organization that includes 45,000 churches serving 30 million people across the country, is circulating among its leaders the draft of a policy statement that would encourage lawmakers to pass legislation creating mandatory controls for carbon emissions.

Environmentalists rely on empirical evidence as their rationale for Congressional action, and many evangelicals further believe that protecting the planet from human activities that cause global warming is a values issue that fulfills Biblical teachings asking humans to be good stewards of the earth.

"Genesis 2:15," said Richard Cizik, the association's vice president for governmental affairs, citing a passage that serves as the justification for the effort: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."

"We believe that we have a rightful responsibility for what the Bible itself challenges," Mr. Cizik said. "Working the land and caring for it go hand in hand. That's why I think, and say unapologetically, that we ought to be able to bring to the debate a new voice."

By themselves, environmental groups have made scant progress on global warming legislation in Congress, beyond a nonbinding Senate resolution last summer that recommends a program of mandatory controls on gases that cause global warming.

Officials with the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council said they welcomed the added muscle evangelicals could bring to their cause. But they agreed that it remained uncertain how much difference it could make.

A major obstacle to any measure that would address global warming is Senator James M. Inhofe, an [Oklahoma](#) Republican who is chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee and an evangelical himself, but a skeptic of climate change caused by human activities.

Mr. Inhofe has led efforts to keep mandatory controls on greenhouse gases out of any emission reduction bill considered by his committee and has called human activities contributing to global warming "the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people."

"You can always find in Scriptures a passage to misquote for almost anything," Mr. Inhofe said in an interview, dismissing the position of Mr. Cizik's association as "something very strange."

Mr. Inhofe said the vast majority of the nation's evangelical groups would oppose global warming legislation as inconsistent with a conservative agenda that also includes opposition to abortion rights and gay rights. He said the National Evangelical Association had been "led down a liberal path" by environmentalists and others who have convinced the group that issues like poverty and the environment are worth their efforts.

At the same time, Mr. Inhofe said he took the association's stance seriously because of the influence its leaders had on people who generally voted Republican. Evangelical groups including the Noah's Ark Foundation lobbied successfully in 1996 to block efforts by the House to weaken the Endangered Species Act.

Now known as the Noah Alliance, the group continues to work on environmental issues, along with groups like the Evangelical Environmental Network, which describes itself as a "biblically orthodox Christian" organization. It subscribes to a policy of "creation care," which it defines as "caring for all of God's creation by stopping and preventing activities that are harmful," like air and water pollution and species extinction.

Mr. Inhofe said many other evangelical organizations held opposing views on the environment. He cited a coalition of faith organizations, scientists and policy experts known as the Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship. The council formed in 2000 only to issue a statement of concerns that declared global warming problems caused by humans as only "speculative." A new version of the council is planning to organize shortly, and members are re-examining their stances.

A member of the original group's advisory committee, Michael Cromartie, vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative group that studies moral issues and public policy, said more recent disputes among conservatives over global warming focused not on the science behind it but on ways to address it.

Mr. Cizik said the alliance's draft position on global warming was still under review by its leaders and would not be issued unless they voted unanimously to support it. If only a majority supports it, he said, it could be released as "an evangelical statement on climate change."

While he was reluctant to predict its potential political impact, he said, "I don't think there's a Republican running for the White House in 2008 who will not have to deal with the emergence of evangelicals on creation care."

John Green, a senior fellow for the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, said a policy statement from the National Alliance of Evangelicals could influence Congress. But the real test, he said, was whether the group's leaders could influence their congregants.

"It's still early in the process," he said of evangelical involvement in the environmental movement. "Among rank and file, evangelicals are as environmental as the rest of us. They're in favor of environmental protections, at least in principle."

On the other hand, he added, "they don't like environmentalists. They associate environmentalists with the Sierra Club and with people who have nontraditional religiosity. Alliance leaders have a real opportunity here, but the impediment is getting over the image of environmentalists."

Mr. Green said the full impact of the alliance position would not be known for several years. But if their support for global warming legislation increases, "then," he said, "Senator Inhofe is going to have to sit up and listen."

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