

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE - A NEW YEARS POLICY AUDIT

By Rabbi Steve Gutow, President, Jewish Council for Public Affairs

As we prepare for the High Holidays, we are also winding down from the hottest summer in recorded history. We have seen an alarming rise of natural disasters that are increasingly attributed to climate change - rare tornadoes in New York City, floods in Nashville, a grain shortage and embargo in Russia, and the Pakistani flood crisis affecting 20 million people, which is more than the Indian Ocean tsunami, Kashmir earthquake, Cyclone Nargis, and the Haitian earthquake – combined.

Consider also the number of human-made disasters related to fossil fuel energy consumption. The oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico has so far leaked out almost 210 million gallons of oil into the sea, ranking it among the largest spills in history. We have also seen oil spills in the Dead Sea and in Michigan.

Juxtaposed with oily birds and the devastated Gulf habitat is our global dependence on oil, which continues to send Iran \$100 million a day in revenue. The impact of newer, tougher sanctions against Iran continues and we are gearing up yet again for another visit by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the United Nations in New York. We see all this and we ask ourselves – how can we stop oil dependence from empowering anti-Israel fascists and ruining our environment?

As we move into the Jewish year of 5771, COEJL* and the JCPA decided a good first step would be to conduct an ‘energy policy audit’ together with you now. In other words, before Congress reconvenes and while we are contemplating this year’s good and bad as it might appear in the Book of Life we’ve decided to review our position on energy policy.

As an umbrella agencies, the representative voice of the organized American Jewish community, JCPA and COEJL cultivate a nuanced approach that seeks to incorporate the views of its partners. We consider energy independence and environmental protection as mutually reinforcing goals, two pillars that compose the backbone of a comprehensive plan for energy security at-large.

In JCPA’s 2007 resolution we emphasized the importance of adopting “a comprehensive energy plan that effectively addresses our dependence on foreign oil while taking into account the environmental, economic and other domestic needed changes.” In COEJL’s 2008 “Jewish Community Priorities for Climate and Energy Policy,” JCPA and ten other major American Jewish organizations promoted domestic energy security while opposing drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. We also encouraged aggressive climate change legislation, including support for a market mechanism to create a cap on carbon-dioxide emissions.*

This year, we built upon this rising awareness of the threat posed to us and our environment by our dependence on fossil fuels and launched the Don’tFundTerror.org campaign. Together with 18 other major American Jewish organizations and 4,000 plus individuals we sent a message to the Senate that, “A comprehensive energy strategy that cuts our addiction to foreign oil, boosts clean energy technology, and moves our nation dramatically towards reduced energy dependence is absolutely vital to our national security, to Israel’s safety, and to the fight against terrorism.” We also stressed that “national security, military and intelligence experts, here and in Israel, have spoken out for a comprehensive strategy that

* The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL) is an initiative that’s been housed at JCPA since its inception.

takes on the destabilizing effects of fossil fuel dependence and climate change.”

What does this mean in terms of our 2010/5770 energy policy audit? As we have stated recently in the New York Jewish Week, we believe that ending America’s use and dependence on foreign oil must be an important component of energy and climate legislation and that reducing fossil fuel consumption globally will both help improve energy security and also decrease greenhouse gas emissions. As we move into the fall we will look at current and anticipated legislation in terms of these priorities. That is our job; that will continue to be our job.