

Environmentalists Split on BP Response

The tragedy in the Gulf of Mexico has left a divide among activists: how hard should they press Obama on climate change and other issues?

By Daniel Stone | Newsweek

Despite the awful circumstances, May 27 was a pretty good day for environmentalists. Five weeks after the explosion in the Gulf of Mexico, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, with the backing of President Obama, halted all on-going drilling in deep water similar to what BP had been doing before the accident. For environmental groups, it was the best news they had received in years—and, to some, the first time their friend in the White House had decisively chosen the planet over the economy.

But hopes that this game-changing moment would spur action to lessen America's reliance on fossil fuels have fizzled over the past several weeks. Senate Democrats have nearly given up the push for a price on carbon. And during Obama's prime-time address to the nation last week, he hardly mentioned climate at all, except to urge that the Senate consider passing some sort of bill, leaving out specifics.

As a golden opportunity to push for sweeping environmental legislation appears to slip away, the environmental community itself has begun to splinter, showing growing divisions over just how hard it should

criticize the man it helped elect. Over several e-mail listservs that connect the leaders of the nation's largest environmental groups, discussion about political strategy has turned to debate. "We need to be hitting harder and demanding more, but there are other people who think we need to take what we can get or risk ending up with nothing," said the leader of one group who asked not to be identified speaking about private discussions.



Activists unfurl protest banners behind Interior Secretary Ken Salazar (left) and Deputy Secretary David Hayes on Capitol Hill in May. Manuel Balce Ceneta / AP

The beginning of the fracture was captured in a November article from environmental newspaper Greenwire, which asked a wide range of groups what they would reasonably be happy with as part of a comprehensive energy and climate bill. A broad collection, including the Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, and League of Conservation Voters answered with a string of generalities, including things like less pollution, more jobs, and greater security. But other groups saw the weak list of demands as a passive willingness to take what it could get rather than push members of Congress to shoot higher. "It's frustrating that we've got a number of the very large, well-connected environmental groups continuing to be Pollyannaish about it all—going along with whatever we can get instead of ramping up pressure as we

should,” says Kieran Suckling, director of the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson, Ariz.

There has always been a philosophical and strategy divide between some of the nation’s more iconic environmental advocates. While Greenpeace sends activists into dangerous and often illegal situations to gain attention, the larger and richer groups devote more resources to lobbyists and strategic media campaigns. But the fracture has deepened now as some in the community believe this could be their best opportunity to be victorious—if the groups use their collective power the same way health-care reform proponents pushed hard, and won, against corporate interests. Most often, smaller groups accuse the bigger players of impeding that effort—of being too scared to lose good will with the president if their demands prove too difficult.

The larger groups defend their strategy. “Look, we subscribe to the view that there can be a spectrum of thinking, and that there’s still room to be supportive of the president,” says Dave Willett, a spokesman for

the Sierra Club, which announced Thursday morning, along with a band of other groups, an \$11 million ad campaign to ask Congress to take decisive action on climate this summer. That request, however, is likely to be polite. An op-ed on the Huffington Post last week described Sierra’s style of criticism of Obama akin to talking to a family member, saying, “Look, you know I love you, but you gotta stop.”

But elsewhere, the thinking is more focused, calculated, and tense. Leaders from Friends of the Earth, Public Citizen, and 350.org have increased the tenor of their advocacy by prodding members of Congress and coordinating grassroots events to reach Obama and congressional Democrats. Jackie Savitz—a senior scientist with Oceana, an ocean-advocacy group primarily concerned with climate change’s effect on acidification—says that the group is “angry” that Obama hasn’t stepped up in a more decisive way. Sensing a fleeting window of opportunity, the group’s perennial list of demands is being expanded into a bigger set of requests to fit the moment. Over the next few months, says Savitz, “we’ll be doubling down.”