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Stung by Obama, Environmentalists Weigh Options

- LESLIE KAUFMAN

In late August, the State Department gave a crucial go-ahead on a controversial pipeline to bring tar sands oil from Canada to the Gulf Coast. Then on Friday, leading into the holiday weekend, the Obama administration announced without warning that it was walking away from stricter ozone pollution standards that it had been promising for three years and instead sticking with Bush-era standards.

John D. Walke, clean air director of the Natural Resources Defense Council, an advocacy group based in New York, likened the ozone decision to a “bomb being dropped.”

Mr. Walke and representatives of other environmental groups saw the president’s actions as brazen political sellouts to business interests and the Republican Party, which regards environmental regulations as job killers and a brick wall to economic recovery.

The question for environmentalists became, what to do next?

“There is shock and chaos here,” Mr. Walke said, “so I do not know. I can’t answer that question.” But he added that his group would resume a smog lawsuit against the government that it had dropped because it had been lulled into believing that this administration would enact tougher regulations without being forced to do so by the courts.

Political analysts watching the Obama administration’s pullback from the environmental agenda this past month say that in the current climate there is little chance that environmentalists or their allies will ever side with the Republicans. After all, the Republican-led House of Representatives has been aggressively moving to curtail protections for endangered species and regulations for clean air and water, and most of the Republican presidential candidates have been intensely critical of any government effort to address climate change.



Still, they say, the president could face political repercussions in subtler but nevertheless corrosive ways: from losing volunteer enthusiasm to tying up his allies in fights with him instead of with his enemies.

“Energy from part of the base will now be directed at communicating with the White House and not with the public about the administration’s record,” said Daniel J. Weiss, director of climate strategy at the Center for American Progress, a liberal research group with close ties to the White House.

And Justin Ruben, executive director of MoveOn.org, a five-million-member online progressive political organization that played a significant role in President Obama’s election in 2008, said he was sure that his members would be deflated.

“How are our members in Ohio and Florida who pounded the pavement in 2008 going to make the case for why this election matters?” Mr. Ruben said. “Stuff like this

is devastating to the hope and passion that fuels the volunteers that made the president's 2008 campaign so unique and successful."

Anthony Leiserowitz, director of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, who does extensive work on public perception and the environment, said the real threat to the president's reputation stemming from the ozone decision went far beyond environmentalists.

"It could play into an emerging narrative in his own party that he is caving too quickly to Republican pressure," Dr. Leiserowitz said. "It is a dangerous narrative in your own base because it cuts down on enthusiasm and it is a narrative that his opponents will pick up on."

In fact, it is a lesson that some environmental groups have already learned, and they are preparing to act accordingly.

"I think that two-plus years into Obama's presidency is more than enough time for him to have established a clear weak record," said Kierán Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, which has been battling the president on endangered species.

"The environmental movement needs to keep piling the pressure on and realizing playing nicey-nice won't work," Mr. Suckling said, adding that more public actions and lawsuits are the way to get Mr. Obama's attention.

His is not the only group going this way, but so far it is unclear that protests are being heard.

All last week across the street from the White House, Bill McKibben, a founder of 350.org, a grass-roots organization that advocates limiting carbon emissions, staged demonstrations to protest the Keystone XL pipeline, which would bring the tar sands oil from Canada.

As of Friday, Mr. McKibben said, more than a thousand people had been arrested in the previous days of protest, including Obama campaign staff members from 2008. Yet, he said of the White House, "we heard not one word from them."

One of those former campaign workers who was arrested was Courtney Hight, who was the youth vote director in Florida in 2008. She offered an explicit warning: "If the president decides not to permit the pipeline, he will reignite the enthusiasm many of my friends and I felt in 2008. But if he approves it, it is just human nature that the disappointment will sap the enthusiasm that drove us to work so hard last time."