Remarks By John McCain on Climate Change Policy

May 12, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain delivered the following remarks as prepared for delivery at the Vestas Training Facility, in Portland, OR:

Thank you all very much. I appreciate the hospitality of Vestas Wind Technology. Today is a kind of test run for the company. They've got wind technicians here, wind studies, and all these wind turbines, but there's no wind. So now I know why they asked me to come give a speech.

Every day, when there are no reporters and cameras around to draw attention to it, this company and others like it are doing important work. And what we see here is just a glimpse of much bigger things to come. Wind power is one of many alternative energy sources that are changing our economy for the better. And one day they will change our economy forever.

Wind is a clean and predictable source of energy, and about as renewable as anything on earth. Along with solar power, fuel-cell technology, cleaner burning fuels and other new energy sources, wind power will bring America closer to energy independence. Our economy depends upon clean and affordable alternatives to fossil fuels, and so, in many ways, does our security. A large share of the world's oil reserves is controlled by foreign powers that do not have our interests at heart. And as our reliance on oil passes away, their power will vanish with it.

In the coming weeks, I intend to address many of the great challenges that America's energy policies must meet. When we debate energy bills in Washington, it should be more than a competition among industries for special favors, subsidies, and tax breaks. In the Congress, we need to send the special interests on their way -- without their favors and subsidies. We need to draw on the best ideas of both parties, and on all the resources a free market can provide. We need to keep our eyes on big goals in energy policy, the serious dangers, and the common interests of the American people.

Today I'd like to focus on just one of those challenges, and among environmental dangers it is surely the most serious of all. Whether we call it "climate change" or "global warming," in the end we're all left with the same set of facts. The facts of global warming demand our urgent attention, especially in Washington. Good stewardship, prudence, and simple commonsense demand that we to act meet the challenge, and act quickly.

Some of the most compelling evidence of global warming comes to us from NASA. No longer do we need to rely on guesswork and computer modeling, because satellite images reveal a dramatic disappearance of glaciers, Antarctic ice shelves and polar ice sheets. And I've seen some of this evidence up close. A few years ago I traveled to the area of Svalbard, Norway, a group of islands in the Arctic Ocean. I was shown the southernmost point where a glacier had reached twenty years earlier. From there, we had to venture northward up the fjord to see where that same glacier ends today -- because all the rest has melted. On a trip to Alaska, I heard about a national park visitor's center that was built to offer a picture-perfect view of a large glacier. Problem is, the glacier is gone. A work of nature that took ages to form had melted away in a matter of decades.

Our scientists have also seen and measured reduced snowpack, with earlier runoffs in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere. We have seen sustained drought in the Southwest, and across the world average temperatures that seem to reach new records every few years. We have seen a higher incidence of extreme weather events. In the frozen wilds of Alaska, the Arctic, Antarctic, and elsewhere, wildlife biologists have noted sudden changes in animal migration patterns, a loss of their habitat, a rise in sea levels. And you would think that if the polar bears, walruses, and sea birds have the good sense to respond to new conditions and new dangers, then humanity can respond as well.

We have many advantages in the fight against global warming, but time is not one of them. Instead of idly debating the precise extent of global warming, or the precise timeline of global warming, we need to deal with the central facts of rising temperatures, rising waters, and all the endless troubles that global warming will bring. We stand warned by serious and credible scientists across the world that time is short and the dangers are great. The most relevant question now is whether our own government is equal to the challenge.

There are vital measures we can take in the short term, even as we focus on long-term policies to mitigate the effects of global warming. In the years ahead, we are likely to see reduced water supplies, more forest fires than in previous decades, changes in crop production, more heat waves afflicting our cities and a greater intensity in storms. Each one of these consequences of climate change will require policies to protect our citizens, especially those most vulnerable to violent weather. Each one will require new precautions in the repair and construction of our roads, bridges, railways, seawalls and other infrastructure. Some state and local
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We need to set a better example in Washington, by consistently applying the best environmental businesses to adopt or invest in low-carbon-based technologies. And to create greater demand for the best technologies and practices in energy conservation, we will use the purchasing power of the United States government. Our government can hardly expect citizens and private businesses to adopt or invest in low-carbon technologies when it doesn't always hold itself to the same standard. We need to set a better example in Washington, by consistently applying the best environmental standards to every purchase our government makes.

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As a nation, we make our own environmental plans and our own resolutions. But working with other nations to arrest climate change can be an even tougher proposition. One of the greatest difficulties is to gain the cooperation of China. That nation today is dealing with a catastrophic earthquake and the loss of thousands of citizens, including many children and students. The United States government has offered to help in any way possible, and all of us hope that rescuers will be able to save more lives at a terrible time for the people of the Sichuan Province.

In my approach to global climate control efforts, we will apply the principle of equal treatment. We will apply the same environmental standards to industries in China, India, and elsewhere that we apply to our own industries. And if industrializing countries seek an economic advantage by evading those standards, I would work with the European Union and other like-minded governments that plan to address the global warming problem to develop effective diplomacy, effect a transfer of technology, or other means to engage those countries that decline to enact a similar cap.

In a cap-and-trade energy economy, the cost of building new reactors will be less prohibitive. The incentives to invest in a mature, zero-emissions technology will be stronger. New research and innovation will help the industry to overcome the well-known drawbacks to nuclear power, such as the transport and storage of waste. And our government can help in these efforts. We can support research to extend the use of existing plants. Above all, we must make certain that every plant in America is safe from the designs of terrorists. And when all of this is assured, it will be time again to expand our use of one of the cleanest, safest, and most reliable sources of energy on earth.

For all of the last century, the profit motive basically led in one direction -- toward machines, methods, and industries that used oil and gas. Enormous good came from that industrial growth, and we are all the beneficiaries of the national prosperity it built. But there were costs we weren't counting, and often hardly noticed. And these terrible costs have added up now, in the atmosphere, in the oceans, and all across the natural world. They are no longer tenable, sustainable, or defensible. And what better way to correct past errors than to turn the creative energies of the free market in the other direction? Under the cap-and-trade system, this can happen. In all its power, the profit motive will suddenly begin to shift and point the other way toward cleaner fuels, wiser ways, and a healthier planet.

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In addressing the problem of climate change, cooperation from the government of China will be essential. China, India, and other developing economic powers in particular are among the greatest contributors to global warming today -- increasing carbon emissions at a furious pace -- and they are not receptive to international standards. Nor do they think that we in the industrialized world are in any position to preach the good news of carbon-emission control. We made most of our contributions to global warming before anyone knew about global warming.

This set of facts and perceived self-interests proved the undoing of the Kyoto Protocols. As president, I will not permit eight long years to pass without serious action on serious challenges. I will not accept the same dead-end of failed diplomacy that claimed Kyoto. The United States will lead and will lead with a different approach -- an approach that speaks to the interests and obligations of every nation.

Shared dangers mean shared duties, and global problems require global cooperation. The United States and our friends in Europe cannot alone deal with the threat of global warming. No nation should be exempted from its obligations. And least of all should we make exceptions for the very countries that are accelerating carbon emissions while the rest of us seek to reduce emissions. If we are going to establish meaningful environmental protocols, then they must include the two nations that have the potential to pollute the air faster, and in greater annual volume, than any nation ever in history.

At the same time, we will continue in good faith to negotiate with China and other nations to enact the standards and controls that are in the interest of every nation -- whatever their stage of economic development. And America can take the lead in offering these developing nations the low-carbon technologies that we will make and they will need. One good idea or invention to reduce carbon emissions is worth a thousand finely crafted proposals at a conference table. And the governments of these developing economic powers will soon recognize, as America is beginning to do, their urgent need for cleaner-burning fuels and safer sources of energy.

If the efforts to negotiate an international solution that includes China and India do not succeed, we still have an obligation to act.

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For all of its historical disregard of environmental standards, it cannot have escaped the attention of the Chinese regime that China's skies are dangerously polluted, its beautiful rivers are dying, its grasslands vanishing, its coastlines receding, and its own glaciers melting. We know many of these signs from our own experience -- from environmental lessons learned the hard way. And today, all the world knows that they are the signs of even greater trouble to come. Pressing on blindly with uncontrolled carbon emissions is in no one's interest, especially China's. And the rest of the world stands ready to help.
Like other environmental challenges -- only more so -- global warming presents a test of foresight, of political courage, and of the unselfish concern that one generation owes to the next. We need to think straight about the dangers ahead, and to meet the problem with all the resources of human ingenuity at our disposal. We Americans like to say that there is no problem we can't solve, however complicated, and no obstacle we cannot overcome if we meet it together. I believe this about our country. I know this about our country. And now it is time for us to show those qualities once again.

Thank you.