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06/26/2003 01:49:25 PM

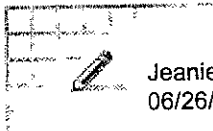
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Subject: Cox Newspapers (6/25/03) re: Environmentalists' forum launches anti-Bush effort

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Environmentalists' forum launches anti-Bush effort

Julia Malone - Cox Washington Bureau
Thursday, June 26, 2003

Washington --- When the League of Conservation Voters hosts Democratic presidential hopefuls in a forum tonight, the significance won't be the stands the candidates take on environmental issues.

Even close observers see few differences on the subject among the Democrats.

For many in the the environmental movement, the greater importance of the Los Angeles event will be that it marks the national launch of what could be their biggest campaign effort ever, aimed chiefly at defeating President Bush next year.

Among the nine announced Democratic challengers, six of whom are planning to participate in the forum, "All would be better than President Bush when it comes to the environment," Deb Callahan, president of the League of Conservation Voters, told reporters this week.

The purpose of the forum, she said, is mainly to show how the Democrats differ with the Bush administration, which her group portrays as trying to roll back progress on the environment.

Both the league, which calls itself the political arm of the environmental movement, and the 750,000-member Sierra Club are already hiring political pros, raising funds and planning to dispatch thousands of activists to go door to door in key battleground states.

"We consider this one of the most important elections ever for the environment," said the Sierra Club's political director, Margaret Conway.

Rallying the public against the president has not been easy, especially in the post-Sept. 11 era. Although the persistent criticism of Bush on environmental issues appears to have raised doubts that he may not be "green" enough, the president continues to receive favorable ratings in the polls.

The Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters have taken high-profile roles in recent federal elections. The league, for example, is estimated to have spent as much as \$8 million in 2002, when it targeted a dozen members of Congress as anti-environment and took credit for helping to defeat six. The group plans to spend even more next year in its effort to chip away at Bush's popularity.

The league this week laid out its case against the president in a "report card" that faults almost every aspect of the White House policies on protecting forests, purifying the water and cleaning the air.

With the first big presidential primary in New Hampshire seven months away, the groups are planning to take their message to voters there.

The Sierra Club already has hired a field staffer to gather data for a pamphlet whose working title is "New Hampshire Communities at Risk."

A similar effort is in the works in Iowa, where the first presidential caucuses will be held.

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