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Science Heads List of Candidate Debate Queries

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Science Heads List of Candidate Debate Queries

MICHAEL B. GERRARD

Question 1: How would your administration make decisions on questions of science? Those who favor or oppose government action for economic or ideological reasons have taken to hiring their own scientists. Sometimes these experts usefully think outside the accepted boxes and bring fresh insights, but often instead they spread fringe ideas based on flimsy data. These purchased expert opinions can then be used to impede or reverse progress on solving pressing problems.

There are established institutions that can serve as a forum for poring through the existing science and determining what we know and what questions remain, and how much confidence we can have in our theories. The congressionally chartered National Academy of Sciences is in the forefront, but there are many others. Society must be open to new ideas and creative approaches, and distinguishing the transformative thinker from the crackpot is a challenge, but when it comes to setting policy, choices must be made. Mr. Candidate, to whom will you be listening?

Question 2: How will you prepare the country for a changing climate? We are past the point where reducing greenhouse gas emissions will halt climate change. Cutting emissions is absolutely essential, as that could prevent the worst impacts, but for at least the next several decades the earth will continue to warm.

If we go on constructing infrastructure, energy systems, dwellings, and other elements of the built environment as if tomorrow's climate was going to be the same as

yesterday's, we will be wasting huge sums and will be putting our works — not to mention our people — in harm's way. Mr. Candidate, will you ensure that future federal planning will fully account for the changing climate, and will you help state and local governments adapt as well?

Question 3: What is the future of coal, and how will you help shape it? Coal is the source of 46 percent of this country's electricity and 35 percent of its energy-related greenhouse gas emissions, as well as large portions of other air pollutants that imperil public health. Certain methods of extracting it also cause great damage to our land, our waters, and the health of our workers. It faces competition from abundant and inexpensive natural gas, and increasingly stringent air pollution regulations. At the same time, the federal government is leasing large tracts of coal resources, especially in Montana and Wyoming, and preparations are being made to create rail and port facilities to transport the coal west to China to help meet its almost insatiable demand for electricity.

New technologies are being developed — though in fits and starts — to capture and sequester the carbon dioxide from coal burning. So far it looks like the economic, energy, and water cost of applying these technologies would be very high, and the ability to store large quantities of gas for centuries is highly uncertain. But coal is central to the economy of several states, and it is difficult to envision an economy that does not continue to rely heavily on coal for at least the balance of this century. Mr. Candidate, how will you ensure that we can transition away from coal at minimum disruption to the economy, and that the environment will be safeguarded as much as it can while we do?

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Energy: Abundant, Affordable, Reliable, Resilient

KENNETH P. GREEN

When it comes to energy and environment, the American people face the same challenge we have always faced: how to balance our need for abundant, affordable, reliable, and resilient flows of energy with our desire to protect the environment, and intelligently husband our natural resources.

Striking that balance, however, cannot be done in a situation where our leaders (and would-be leaders) are either ignorant of, or in denial of, the critical role that energy plays in human empowerment, opportunity, productivity, mobility, and competitiveness. We are, in fact, an energy civilization.

To be clear, this is not a purely partisan problem: both sides have their energy fallacies. On the left, there is the belief that renewables such as wind and solar power are ready to displace a significant fraction of our conventional energy supply, both technologically and economically. They are not, as the experiences of Europe (as well as our own renewable debacles such as Solyndra) make crystal clear. On the right, there is an ongoing love of nuclear power that borders on the fetishistic, given reams of analysis suggesting that nuclear power is neither economically nor environmentally beneficial.

Both the left and right wish to pick winners and losers in the energy marketplace; that is, when they're not calling for a nonsensical "all of the above" policy that calls for all forms of energy production regardless of cost. Both sides display an ignorance of how world energy markets work, and misrepresent the power of whatever policies they might bring to bear on things like