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Greener fields in the forecast

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Heading into his second term, President Bush has earned tremendous political capital he can spend on big goals at home and abroad.

The environment is often overlooked in discussions of Mr. Bush's domestic agenda. The president has a chance to advance a bold vision for environmental progress under his top policy ideal: the ownership society. Let's hope he does so.

One bold move that could garner support of conservatives and environmentalists alike would be ending all energy subsidies. This would please conservatives, who decry tax breaks for wasteful spending on costly renewable energy boondoggles, and environmentalists, who claim the fossil fuel industry gets unnecessary and unmerited public support. The government would save money and consumers would decide what fuels will meet their energy needs.

Another energy idea involves exploration. America's remaining large deposits of oil and natural gas lie under public lands and offshore, which have been put off-limits to oil production due to environmental concerns. Yet oil

and gas exploration is not necessarily incompatible with environmental quality.

On public lands that are not wilderness, roadless areas and national parks, environmentally sensitive exploration should at least be an option. And the revenues from oil and gas leases on public lands could help reduce the deficit and/or pay for environmental programs.

Speaking of public lands, Bush administration efforts to allow states more input into forest planning should improve the health of the nation's public lands by moving to more flexible, site-specific management. In its second term, the administration should go further, allowing states with superior economic and environmental forest performance to take over managing select public lands inside their borders. Congress could give fixed but declining block grants to participating states to help with forest management during the transition.

States would have to be allowed to run the program long enough to counteract environmental damage due to years of federal mismanagement. But any state

with improved economic and environmental performance should be granted those forests outright. Unimproved forests could revert to federal management: New experiments could then be tried.

Another change would end federal incentives that lead to environmental harm. A perfect example is the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The ESA has many flaws, but the main one is creating incentives to destroy species and their habitat.

For example, more than 75 percent of the listed species depend on private land for all or part of their required habitat. Yet property owners who provide the species a suitable habitat are subject to severe regulation, if not outright confiscation.

The property's owner should be compensated when the government imposes land-use restrictions on private property in order to preserve species -- as is done when private land is taken any other public purpose.

The Bush administration could go further and pay "bounties" to property owners who manage their lands so endangered species are encouraged to take up residence there. Compensation or

bounties could come from the revenues from energy production on public lands.

Another example of government action encouraging repeated environmental harm is agriculture subsidies, which cost the taxpayer billions of dollars annually. Subsidies lead to overproduced crops, which depress product prices, keeping many farmers in nearly perpetual dependence.

The subsidies are environmentally disastrous, encouraging farmers to press marginal, environmentally valuable lands into crop production and to overuse pesticides and fertilizers to increase crop yields.

While environmental policy is unlikely to figure prominently in President Bush's State of the Union speech, an improved environment could be

part of the lasting Bush legacy.

Each proposal above would protect the environment and cut government spending, while returning authority and responsibility for natural resource decisions to those most directly affected by environmental management.

Improving the incentives for natural resource users and managers is critical to a healthy environment.

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