Candidates Call Climate Change An 'Urgent' Priority

by DAVID KESTENBAUM

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Sen. John McCain speaks with General Motors employees at the GM Design Center in Warren, Mich., on July 18, 2008.

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McCain and Barack Obama say they would back a 'cap-and-trade' system to limit greenhouse gases in emissions, though they differ on how it would be implemented. Pictured is the Chalk Point power plant in Prince George's County, Md., circa 2001.

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If you are trying to figure out whom to vote for in the upcoming presidential race, the issue of climate change may not be much help. This is one area where both leading candidates for president do not have a lot to disagree about.

In fact, when the two rivals paint a picture of a warmer world, it seems like they might have the same speechwriter.

Consider Republican John McCain's assessment of the problem. He says, "The facts of global warming demand our urgent attention."

Urgent is the very same word that Democrat Barack Obama uses. He calls climate change "one of the most urgent challenges of our generation."

McCain warns that "in the years ahead, we're likely to see reduced water supplies and more forest fires."

Obama worries about "changes in crop production and more heat waves."

Favoring Cap-And-Trade

Their plans for tackling climate change aren't too far apart, either.

Both say they would back a "cap-and-trade" system that would set a limit on the amount of allowable greenhouse gases, and let the free market figure out the best way to make it happen.

The candidates differ a bit in how they would like to see cap-and-trade implemented.

For instance, under a cap-and-trade system, major emitters have to get permits for the greenhouse gases they put out. The government makes sure there is a shortage of permits, so somewhere someone has to cut back on emissions. The big question is who gets the government permits. These could be worth hundreds of billions of dollars a year a decade from now.

McCain favors giving away some permits initially, to ease the transition, and auctioning others.

Obama wants to auction them all. Obama also favors a slightly more aggressive target for emissions reductions, which would mean fewer permits to go around.

Surrogates from both campaigns faced off in July to talk about climate change.

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Obama talks about biofuels at a March 31 news coverage at Molly's Gas Station in Manheim, Pa.

Ken Berlin, co-author of a 2007 report, "Global Warming and the Future of Coal," represented the Obama campaign and tried to find some space between the candidates' positions. "They both support a cap-and-trade system, but when you go beyond that, there are pretty substantial differences in the policies they propose," Berlin said.

But the differences were in the details. McCain supports nuclear energy more than Obama. Obama favors ethanol subsidies. McCain doesn't.

Joe Aldy, an economist at the think tank Resources for the Future, says the two candidates have minor differences on climate change policy.

"One can quibble with some of the details, but at end of the day, the difference between them will get washed out by negotiations between the next president and the Congress," Aldy says.

United On Another Front

For the most part, the candidates aren't trying to fight each other on climate change. They're trying to highlight differences with someone else: President Bush.

"As president, I will not shirk the mantle of leadership the U.S. bears," McCain has said. "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 failed Kyoto," he said, referring to the international climate change treaty that the U.S. has rejected.

Obama also promises a big change at the White House: "From the moment I take office, I will invite the world back to Washington and let it be known that the United States of America is ready to lead again."

The candidates share one other talking point. Actually, it's a nontalking point. In the near term, a cap-and-trade system will raise the price of energy and of gasoline. Obama doesn't like to talk about that. Neither does McCain.