Heavy hits on enviro-pessimism

By Tom Bray, Washington Times

It was not a good week for the enviro-pessimists. Enviro-pessimists are those who believe the planet is heading for catastrophe as a result of man's meddling. But Americans have always preferred optimism to pessimism. And as it happens, the litany of gloom put forward by the enviro-pessimists just doesn't seem to be selling very well.

Last week the Senate confirmed by a vote of 88-8 President Bush's nominee to run the Environmental Protection Agency, Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt, whom groups such as the Sierra Club and Greenpeace had targeted for extinction. Then the Senate rejected efforts to use the energy bill as a vehicle for sharply increasing automobile mileage standards and even added language requiring federal agencies to consider safety when proposing changes in corporate average fuel economy, or CAFE.

Most striking of all, the week ended with Senate rejection of a measure co-sponsored by Sens. John McCain, Arizona Republican, and Joe Lieberman, Connecticut Democrat, to regulate carbon dioxide as a pollutant. The Mc-Cain-Lieberman bill was a scaled-down version of Al Gore's famous — or infamous, depending on your view — Kyoto Accords, which would have required industry to roll back CO2 emissions to pre-1990 levels.

The overall message of last week's votes is that the enviro-pessimists are in retreat. It's little wonder. From being a genuine grass-roots reform movement in the 1960s and '70s, mainstream environmental groups have steadily moved in radical directions, among other things allowing themselves to become the roosting spot for left-wingers after the collapse of the socialist model in the wake of the Cold War. Environmentalism seemed to offer the perfect vehicle for a resurgence of their command-and-control ideas.

But their doom-mongering has left them open to appeals to common sense. One such appeal came two years ago with the publication in English of a book by a Danish statistician, Bjorn Lomborg, titled, "The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the Planet."

Mr. Lomborg, who had been a member of Greenpeace, had set out to disprove what he then considered the outrageous assertions of the late economist Julian Simon, who had long argued that things weren't as bad the enviro-pessimists were saying. But lo and behold, the statistics forced Mr. Lomborg to conclude that not only had Simon been right, but that in most cases the environment actually is getting better.

Do people want an improved environment? Of course. Everybody would like 100 percent assurances that the globe won't melt, cars that get 100 miles to the gallon and EPA administrators who are all-knowing. But polls showing support for such goals are meaningless. When you ask people if they are willing to pay 25 cents more for a gallon of gasoline, for example, support for CAFE falls to 50 percent. The now-dead McCain-Lieberman effort to implement a Kyoto-like policy through the back door would have pushed up petroleum prices by a third.

And for what? Even the enviro-pessimists agree Mr. Gore's much tougher Kyoto agreement wouldn't have done anything to moderate global warming. For that to happen, the father of global-warming theory, James Hansen, once reportedly said, it would take the financial equivalent of "30 Kyotos" — trillions of dollars, in short.

Corporate average fuel economy, or CAFE, suffers the same lack of common sense. As fuel economy improves, experience has showed, people simply drive more — albeit in cars that are smaller and lighter than they otherwise might be, posing a safety risk that even regulators now confess is costing thousands of lives a year.

So if it's a better environment we want, better to focus on mundane things like continued technological progress. More efficient ways of providing goods and services to a growing humanity reduces environmental impact even while improving human living standards. Invention requires wealth, of course. And if the left hates anything more than the news that the environment is getting better, it's that people around the world are getting richer.

That may explain why fewer and fewer of those people are listening to the enviro-pessimists.

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