

## PRESIDENT AND CONGRESS SHOULD EQUIP GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS DOMESTIC POPULATION GROWTH

### An NPG Forum Paper

By David Simcox

Since his election, President Obama has received wide-ranging advice from major environmental nonprofits and experts on dealing with neglected environmental and related energy issues. But their advice generally ignores the most critical environmental threat – U.S. population size and growth. NPG’s advice to Obama and the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress is to develop new permanent machinery to ensure domestic population gets due consideration in national policymaking and to raise the consciousness of Americans about the need to balance population size with resources. As a start, NPG recommends the creation of a network of senior population counselors in the White House and the cabinet-level agencies most concerned with environmental and resource issues. That network should be headed by a senior environmental scientist as Senior Advisor or Special Assistant to the President for Domestic Population and Sustainability. Congress should ensure continuing attention to domestic population by establishing standing committees on population, holding hearings and appointing high-level population experts to Congressional research and fact-finding agencies.

Nothing gets people’s attention more than being elected President of the United States.

Major environmental organizations and experts have greeted Obama’s election and accession to office by showering him with an imposing array of recommendations and appeals on what he should now do as President to deal with the country’s grave environmental and related energy issues. For the most part the appeals are persuasive and technically sound and grounded in solid research. But they have little to say about the one environmental condition that either creates or complicates all other U.S. environmental and resource issues – U.S. population size and growth.

The most detailed and thorough cluster of policy recommendations is the “Transition to Green,” a late 2008 report by 29 top environmental nonprofits, led by such leading groups as Sierra Club, National

Resources Defense Council, Environmental Defense, Wilderness Society, Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife and the Union of Concerned Scientists. Two global population nonprofits also participated: Population Connection and Population Action International.<sup>1</sup>

Their report is a catalogue of environmental ills and proposed legislative, administrative and bureaucratic remedies. The recommendations are grouped according to affected government agencies: three White House environmental and resource-centered agencies, the Environmental Protection Agency, and eleven cabinet-level agencies with major environment and resource portfolios. Climate change, clean air and water, farmlands, forests, open space and national parks are addressed, in addition to public health, sustainable energy, and *overseas* population growth.

But the omission of U.S. population size and growth – now bearing the nation toward 450 million by 2050 – will impair the best efforts to realize the report’s goals of “a healthy environment, green economy and sustainable future.” Most American environmental groups are loathe to discuss U.S. population growth, but find it safe to address it as a third world problem from which the U.S. is presumably exempt. Almost as an afterthought, this report reminds the Department of State and the Agency for International Development (AID) that:

*Population growth in the developing world remains a contributor to deforestation, desertification and the degradation of oceans and waterways and climate change. Investment in family planning is critical to the protection of the global environment.*<sup>2</sup>

It’s as if population growth in the U.S. is not contributing to these same maladies and others at home.

The prestigious Yale School of Environment and Forestry also convened thirteen top environmental advocates to recommend strategies to the new president. Joining in were such heavyweights as the chair of the International Panel on Climate Change; senior representatives of the National Resources Defense Council and Environmental Defense; and noted environmental writer Bill McKibben. The recommendations were sensible, as far as they went, though some might be troubled by prevailing “growthists’ ” enthusiasm for green energy as an engine of growth and job creation.<sup>3</sup>

Paul and Anne Ehrlich, Stanford University population biologists, were alone among the commentators in recognizing that population growth underlies this human predicament. They stated:

*Overall, the administration’s policies should adhere to a number of overarching principles:*

*embrace zero population growth, emphasize conserving more than consuming, expand global educational opportunities, and initiate a Millennium Assessment of Human Behavior to begin a debate on what population size, consumption patterns, economic arrangement, and technologies will lead to a sustainable future.*<sup>4</sup>

Like the Ehrlichs, who have labeled the U.S. as the “world’s most overpopulated nation,” NPG has long advocated a renewed debate on attainment of a sustainable population size for the U.S. We favor zero population growth, not as an end, but as a way station for the U.S. on the road to a smaller population sustainable for the long term. The new administration, with its strong environmental commitment and willingness to think outside the box of conventional economics, has an opportunity to raise national consciousness about population as an environmental factor and stimulate national debate. Its ultimate goal should be to build a broad bipartisan coalition in support of a national population policy to end growth and determine the future size of population for long-term sustainability.

While recognizing that there is no one right way, NPG has several suggestions of its own for President Obama to give population growth a higher profile in national policymaking and day-to-day administration. The president could start by using his executive authority, until legislation – if needed – can be passed, to appoint senior “population counselors” in the White House and Cabinet agencies most involved in resource and environmental issues. Ideally, any authorizing legislation could become a major subsection of a strengthened National Environmental Protection Act, including a statutory requirement for an environmental assessment of the population effects of national undertakings.

White House agencies incorporating population counselors should include the Office of Management

and Budget, the Science Advisor, the Domestic Council, the Council of Economic Advisors, and the Council on Environmental Quality. The senior counselor of those in the White House agencies should be designated “Senior Advisor or Special Assistant to the President for Domestic Population and Sustainability Issues.”<sup>5</sup> One population expert already in a high White House position who would be particularly suitable for such leadership, for example, would be John Holdren, the President’s current Science Advisor. Holdren, a former President of the Association for the Advancement of Science, has been a Professor of Environmental Policy at Harvard, and has spent almost four decades writing and lecturing about overpopulation’s threat to U.S. resources and environment.<sup>6</sup>

Cabinet-level agencies staffed with population counselors should include at a minimum the Environmental Protection Agency and the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Interior, Energy, Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, Treasury and Transportation. The Senior Advisor or Special Assistant and agency population counselors would have a clear mandate to analyze trends nationally and in their particular agencies’ areas of interest, and report on 1) the consequences of proposed national and regional policies for population growth, stability and distribution; and 2) the consequences of growth and distribution of population on the nation’s environment, resources, consumption, labor market, fiscal health and infrastructure. The agency population counselors would be tasked to work with the Senior Advisor or Special Assistant in preparing a biennial national population assessment for Congress and the President. They would also prepare annual, more specialized assessments for their respective agencies and be mandated to critique draft legislation affecting population that originates in the Executive Branch and Congress.

The U.S. Congress has been notoriously reticent about even displaying interest in what might smack of population planning. A recent indication was the condemnation among conservative and some moderate Congress members and pundits of Obama’s January 2009 stimulus proposal to expand voluntary access to contraceptive services. Critics charged class-bias or eugenics,<sup>7</sup> or, in columnist George Will’s words, treating children as “parasites.”

A way must be found to inject population considerations into Congress’ committee structure, hearings, Congressional Research Service and Government Accountability Office (GAO) and other fact-finding bodies. It will probably be necessary to start small. Useful approaches for Congress, with White House and public prodding, might be a population caucus or working group, resuming and expanding the work of the House Select Committee on Population seated from 1977 to 1979.

An ultimate overriding mandate, after sufficient fact-finding, would be an eventual review and updating of the 1972 *National Commission on Population and the American Future*. Finally, Congress might be persuaded to create within the relevant national resource committees of its two chambers standing committees or sub-committees on population and sustainability.

This consciousness-raising process about America’s overpopulation peril requires dedicated White House leadership. There are risks. Under indifferent or contrarian leadership the proposed government population network could well be captured by pro-populationists, arguing that the U.S. population problem is not too many but too few.

Every environmental and population advocacy group, and every concerned American, should press the White House for action and urge Congress to find ways to regularly address U.S. population size and growth.

## Notes:

1. [http://docs.nrdc.org/legislation/files/leg\\_08112401a.pdf](http://docs.nrdc.org/legislation/files/leg_08112401a.pdf).
2. See note 1, Agency for International Development, page 11-19.
3. <http://e360.yale.edu/content/featuremsp?id=2100>.
4. See Note 3.
5. William Ryerson, "Concept Paper for an Office of Special Assistant to the President for Population and Sustainability Issues and Similar Offices Elsewhere in the Federal Government." Population Media Center (unpublished draft), February 2009.
6. See John P. Holdren, "Population and the American Predicament," *Daedalus*, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, fall, 1973. With permission of MIT Press, the article is available at [www.npg.org/notable%20papers/JohnPHoldrenpaper.html](http://www.npg.org/notable%20papers/JohnPHoldrenpaper.html).
7. See Baptist Press News at; [www.bpnews.net/BPnews.asp?id=29733](http://www.bpnews.net/BPnews.asp?id=29733).

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