



American Recreation Coalition

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to health and happiness through recreation.*

NEWS

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RECREATION AND 2008: FORUM HIGHLIGHTS OPPORTUNITIES AND NEED FOR ACTION

Washington, D.C. (Thursday, September 20) -- Recreation issues can have an important place in the public policy debates associated with the elections of 2008, according to a diverse and potent group of national policy experts who spoke at *Recreation 2008: Making Our Issues Count*. The national forum, which was held by the American Recreation Coalition (ARC), brought together key recreation and conservation leaders to discuss ways to encourage candidates for federal and state offices in 2008 to consider recreation and conservation issues as key means of achieving important goals in healthcare, education, crime deterrence and addressing other voter concerns.

Keynoting the forum was U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), who offered insights derived from service as a White House staffer, as Governor of Tennessee, as a candidate for the Republican Presidential nomination and now as a U.S. Senator. Senator Alexander also served as the Chairman of the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors (PCAO) in the 1980's. The Senator noted that recreation and conservation concerns have always been part of his platform as he ran for office – and a big part of his agenda in office. He recalled the work of PCAO and noted the continuing support of its key recommendations across the nation, including greenways, scenic byways and trails programs. He also emphasized the value of connecting national issues with the grassroots, noting that while he will listen to Washington representatives and take actions on good recommendations, the route to action is much easier when those same ideas are delivered by a constituent. He then talked about the importance of addressing recreation as a vital tool in combating health concerns associated with physical inactivity. He was appalled to learn, he told the group, that today's youth may well be the first generation in history to have a shorter life expectancy than its parents – a prognosis he recently heard from the Chief Medical Officer of the Hospital Corporation of America.

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Senator Alexander then delivered his key recommendation: a campaign to create a third national recreation commission. The Senator said, "It's a different time. We need to reach out, educate, and encourage young people to embrace the great American Outdoors for the sake of their health and their heritage." The Senator suggested that the popularity of video games, films and video be used to entice youth into the outdoors. He suggested polling efforts to determine how else to attract kids outdoors and urged the group to enlist the support of grandparents. Children and nature issues cut across party lines, according to the Senator, and bipartisan support can be found for recreation initiatives in 2008. He encouraged outdoor recreation groups to unite with conservationists to work out a beneficial strategy for approaching Congress together. He also shared his frank views on the challenges involved in working with both Republicans and Democrats on recreation issues in today's political climate. "Recreation and conservation issues are essentially absent" from Republican policy discussions, he told the group, and the Democratic agenda items are too often divisive.

Following the keynote, ARC Vice Chairman and SGMA International President Tom Cove moderated a panel comprised of three distinguished recreation policy experts who have served as key Presidential appointees: Bob Herbst, former Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks during the Carter Administration; Bill Horn, former Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks under President Reagan; and Jim Lyons, former Under Secretary of Agriculture for Natural Resources and the Environment in the Clinton Administration. Cove challenged the audience to think not only as recreation enthusiasts but also as political operatives. "Although recreation is 'motherhood and apple pie,'" Cove told the group, "there are challenges in getting heard in the political arena." The panelists confirmed that presenting recreation as a solution to the nation's most pressing concerns is a better strategy than championing recreation issues as a goal. Recreation can prove its relevance as a viable means of lowering healthcare costs, enhancing environmental stewardship, deterring youth crime and violence, and creating a sustainable economy through the 400 billion dollars in annual recreation revenue – mostly consumer spending. Tying issues to the "greening" trends, collaborating with other interests such

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as the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, and connecting recreation to the problems elected officials face “at home” can boost the goals of the recreation community. The panelists agreed that a strategic plan is needed which considers themes, the reality that certain states and districts are key “battlegrounds” where local interests in recreation will be considered, and effective use of the many communications tools available to recreation organizations – including those prohibited from being involved in direct political activities.

Greg Cohen, President of the American Highway Users Alliance (AHUA), offered a case study to the forum participants about AHUA’s *The Road to Congress* candidate binder. He noted that the binder, which had been delivered to virtually all 2004 candidates for Congress, had been prepared to achieve several key goals, including: educating the organization’s members on current research, legislation and policies relevant to their issues; providing candidates with easily accessible fact sheets; and avoiding the danger of inundating an elected official’s office with an excess of resources. He expressed envy about the passion found within the recreation community and told the group that the outdoor recreation industry and initiatives “can be a powerful force, especially in election year swing states.” Arming recreation enthusiasts with solid research and empowering them to make their voices heard on Capitol Hill can make a difference, he concluded.

A second panel focused even more on recreation community tools, including: meetings and events; magazines and newsletters; training members to be effective volunteers in political campaigns; planning for Great Outdoors Month 2008 (June); and participating in Presidential platform committee hearings. Panelists included Neil Dhillon, General Manager of Ruder Finn Washington, and Duncan Neasham, Public Affairs Manager for the National Marine Manufacturers Association. Mr. Neasham recommended working on a local level and creating opportunities, such as a legislative conference, to bring recreation advocates to Washington, D.C. Mr. Dhillon introduced the idea of utilizing the media by writing letters to the editor or submitting health and recreation questions for televised national debates to bolster the prominence of recreation issues. Creating opportunities for public figures and celebrities to champion the great outdoors could also

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be a successful tool, he noted. Both panelists concurred that the recreation community can appeal to both sides of the aisle and act as an expert resource for all candidates and Members of Congress.

Former Senator Dale Bumpers (D-AR) closed the session by recalling successes during his career as Arkansas's Governor and Senator and in his pursuit of the Presidential nomination of the Democratic Party. A supporter of recreation and conservation issues throughout his career, Senator Bumpers told forum participants that the American people recognize that recreation and conservation initiatives are important to the country's heritage. He echoed calls for strategic planning and reiterated that local issues can be a decisive factor in the outcome of an election. Senator Bumpers recommended that if candidates react to recreation and conservation issues with indifference or express doubts about the value of these causes, they and others should be asked to answer a simple question, "Does this make our nation stronger or not?"

Recreation and 2008: Making Our Issues Count was planned as a call to timely and unified action. Beyond providing valuable information on strategies and tools, the forum was a catalyst for bringing together recreation and conservation leaders interested in contributing meaningfully to the debate associated with the 2008 elections. In wrapping up the session, ARC President Derrick Crandall told the group that opportunities exist for recreation trade associations, membership groups, companies and individual community leaders to get involved and that actions can be in the non-partisan and partisan political spheres. ARC will offer additional opportunities to draw together interested community leaders to capitalize on those opportunities.