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Clinton's wetlands policy, appointments earn A's



President Bill Clinton has held office for nearly a year, and as I see it he's earned the following grades in his performance on environmental issues:

■ **Wetlands: A minus.** Clinton's wetlands policy is excellent. It sets a long-term national goal of increasing the quantity and quality of wetlands, closes several loopholes used by developers to fill wetlands, extends federal protection to 1.7 million acres of Alaskan wetlands and instructs the National Academy of Sciences to make needed revisions to the federal manual for defining wetlands.

Some environmental organizations criticize Clinton's wetlands policy because it exempts land drained and converted to farmland before 1985 and maintained as farmland since. "This package is a net loss for America's wetlands," National Wildlife attorney Jan Goldman-Carter said.

I disagree. A former wetland that is now farmland is not a functional wetland. Realizing this lets us concentrate on protecting and expanding existing wetlands, rather than arguing about hypothetical wetlands that might exist if conditions were different.

Others critics have pointed to the proposal's plan for establishing mitigation banking — obtaining permission to destroy one wetland by creating another wetland elsewhere. In most instances, mitigation banking doesn't work and erodes biodiversity, but after reading the plan I believe Clinton recognizes the deficiencies of this approach and will restrict its use to the most appropriate circumstances. The minus on this grade is for failing to address the implementation of mitigation banking in more detail.

■ **Global climate change: I for incomplete.** Clinton's climate change plan relies too much on volunteer emission reductions on the part of industry, business and the public. We need a more aggressive climate change plan to lower U.S. greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels and below.

■ **Population: C plus.** Clinton released millions of dollars for international and domestic family planning, but he needs to do much more. The incorporation of family planning services into the "basic benefit package" of the Clinton health-care reform package would boost this grade substantially; the United States is the fastest growing industrialized nation and leads the industrialized world in rates of unintended pregnancies and teen pregnancies.

Too often we fail to see the interconnectedness of conservation issues and our burgeoning human population. I would like to see the Clinton administration educate the public about this connection. If population problems — both in the United States and in the world — are not addressed and resolved intelligently, our environmental efforts will fail. Clinton gets a C for population because it appears to be a low environmental priority for him.

■ **Appointments: A.** Clinton's appointment of Bruce Babbitt as secretary of the interior was excellent. Babbitt has seriously addressed issues left to fester during previous administrations, such as federal mining laws and grazing rights on public lands. Also excellent was the selection of Carol Browner to head the Environmental Protection Agency.

She is working hard to reform this heavily bureaucratic agency and make it more effective.

Clinton recently appointed Jack Ward Thomas, a wildlife biologist, to head the U.S. Forest Service. Though we've yet to see Thomas perform, the appointment was intelligent and earned Clinton several points in my book. Thomas was the major author of the forest plan for the Pacific Northwest and will put into action the forest service policy of managing forests as intact ecosystems.

■ **Extra credit: A.** Clinton gets several extra credit points for dismantling the Bush administration's Council on Competitiveness and establishing the White House Office on Environmental Policy. This office has been instrumental in drafting all of Clinton's major environmental policies as well as many overlooked environmental policies, such as mandating government purchases of recycled paper, alternatively fueled vehicles and energy-efficient computer equipment.

Clinton has made a quantum leap from the presidential environmental policies of George Bush. How do you grade Clinton's environmental record? Send your responses to the address below, and I'll summarize them in a later column.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.