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Hope for green policies

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The coming Colorado legislative session brings with it the welcome promise of new leadership for the state's future after eight years of lackluster protection of our natural resources.

Throughout the summer and fall of 2006, candidates running for office from all parties discussed the importance of making Colorado a renewable energy leader while protecting our air, water and open spaces. They articulated the need to balance oil and gas development with protections for wildlife habitat. Candidates with strong conservation agendas were well-received by voters, many of whom feel that action to protect Colorado's environment is long overdue. The voters' feelings were clear: There is no longer room for opposition to balanced environmental policies that protect our quality of life.

Colorado voters sent a message Election Day that they are looking for leaders who will promote new energy technologies, conserve our state's precious water resources, and protect critical wildlife habitat. Evidence of this pro- conservation sentiment includes the fact that 48 out of 51 candidates endorsed by Colorado Conservation Voters won their races. A post-election survey showed that conservation concerns were among the top three issues for all voters and ranked No. 2 for unaffiliated voters and No. 1 for those living on Colorado's Western Slope.

With newly elected and returning state leaders aligned behind the promise of balanced natural resources policy solutions, this week marks the beginning of a momentous opportunity to take long overdue action to protect Colorado's environment. The state legislature, in partnership with our new governor, can address many of our state's conservation challenges by passing a policy agenda that creates a new energy economy, protects Colorado's water quality, and minimizes the impacts of energy development on wildlife habitat.

It is time to use Colorado's technical expertise and sun, wind and agricultural potential to reduce dependence on foreign and finite fossil fuel supplies, and build a stronger economy. State leaders should pass a measure that requires 20 percent of our energy to come from renewable sources by 2015. State leaders also have the chance to pass an energy efficiency proposal, which was vetoed twice by Gov. Bill Owens, that will save consumers another \$500 million. We are also overdue to pass a renewable fuels standard similar to the one vetoed by Owens in 2006, which will create new markets for Colorado farmers to grow fuel for our cars. Colorado can take the lead in creating a new energy future that benefits the state's consumers, environment and economy.

While we work to diversify our energy sources, we should also pass effective measures to lessen the effects of Colorado's record-breaking oil and gas boom on other valuable state resources such as air, water and wildlife. Finding ways to simultaneously protect fish and wildlife habitat is equally important. More than 40 sportsmen and conservation organizations have endorsed a balanced set of guidelines designed to help oil and gas companies minimize their impacts on Colorado's wildlife, and these deserve adoption by state lawmakers.

Finally, we must ensure that our water quality is adequately monitored and protected. This year our state should find funding for an increased work force sufficient to guarantee the safety and quality of Colorado's water supplies. Recent audits by the EPA have cited our non- compliance with water quality standards. This reflects inadequate investment in our Water Quality Control Division. A simple and effective solution is to alter the fees we charge for storm and wastewater management in order to pay for more employees devoted to ensuring that water quality standards are met. Every community in our state deserves adequate water quality protection, and we must act now. It is also time to acknowledge that our water courts need to consider water quality when making water quantity decisions rather than pretend that the

issues are not interrelated.

As the clock begins ticking on a new state legislative session, we are excited about the opportunities that lie ahead in the next five months for Colorado's environment. We know our state leadership and new governor are prepared to take on these important issues and that Colorado citizens are ready for these changes. All that is left is the willpower and discipline to get the job done.

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