

Poll: Majority Wants U.S. Federal Trust Fund for Clean Water

ALEXANDRIA, Virginia, March 7, 2005 (ENS) - More than eight in 10 Americans believe that clean and safe water is a national issue that deserves federal investment, according to a new poll of 900 adults conducted jointly by Republican and Democratic polling firms.

Federal legislation that would create a long term, sustainable, reliable trust fund for clean and safe water infrastructure received support from what the pollsters call "an overwhelming majority" of those surveyed, 86 percent.

More than three-quarters of Americans polled, 77 percent, would rather the federal government invest in water infrastructure than increase spending on entitlement programs, 12 percent.

By 67 percent to 26 percent, Americans prefer spending to guarantee clean and safe water over tax cuts.

Results of the poll undertaken jointly by the Luntz Research Companies, and Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates were published Wednesday.

Luntz Research is a polling firm relied upon largely by Republicans. Penn, Schoen's reputation is largely as a Democratic political polling firm, closely associated with both President Bill Clinton's administration as well as the Senate campaign of his wife Hillary. But the firm also worked for Republican Michael Bloomberg in his mayoral bid in New York City,

They found that an overwhelming majority of those interviewed for this survey, 91 percent, agree that “if, as a country, we are willing to invest over \$30 billion dollars a year on highways and more than \$8 billion a year on our airways, we certainly should be willing to make the necessary investments in our nation’s rivers, lakes and oceans.’

Pollster Dr. Frank Luntz says clean water is an issue that gets support in red as well as blue states. (Photo courtesy Harry Walker Agency)



Commenting on the survey findings, Dr. Frank Luntz said, “I’ll be blunt ... this issue is NOT going to go away. This is not simply an environmental issue. It is an issue that is very personal to voters because of the importance of clean and safe water to their daily lives. This is not a local issue because Americans understand that water has no local boundaries. This is one of those areas where Americans demand that Washington take responsibility.”

The survey found that almost nine in 10 of those polled, 89 percent, say that “federal investment to guarantee clean and safe water is a critical component of our nation’s environmental well-being.”

Dr. Douglas Schoen, senior partner of Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates observed, “Environmental issues writ large can sometimes be divisive, but clean and safe water is not seen by voters as a divisive issue. Instead, there is overwhelming support from both political parties for what is seen as a basic need that has to be protected – clean and safe water for our generation and for our children’s.”



Dr. Douglas Schoen found that clean water is an issue that transcends party politics. (Photo courtesy Columbia University)

The survey put this question to respondents, "Generally speaking, which of the following programs do you think is in greatest need of a dedicated trust fund that would guarantee federal money to help state and local governments pay for maintenance and improvements?"

Clean and safe water got 71 percent of the positive responses, roads and highways got 20 percent, while airports and aviation got a three percent positive response. This result was found across red states and blue states.

"Taxes, of any kind, are never an easy sell," said Luntz. But, he said, clean water is one area where there is real support for a federal investment.

"When more than 80 percent of Americans say they are willing to open their wallets because they think something is a priority, you know it is important. Americans are sending their lawmakers a clear message," Luntz said, protect our nation's water or risk getting left behind by the voters."

Voters are more likely to vote for Members of Congress who support legislation to create a Federal Trust Fund for clean and safe water, and more likely to vote against those who do not, the survey found.

Nearly eight in 10 voters, 78 percent, describe themselves as more likely to vote for their Member of Congress if they learned he or she supported the trust fund, while 63 percent say they are less likely to vote for their member if they learn that he or she opposed the legislation.

The Bush administration has proposed to cut clean water funding from the EPA's budget for fiscal year 2006 by

\$500 million - from \$8.1 billion to \$7.6 billion. Most of this reduction would be achieved by a proposed cut of \$360 million (from \$1.09 billion to \$730 million) to the agency's Clean Water State Revolving Fund (CWSRF) program.

The CWSRF, a loan program that helps local communities repair and replace aging wastewater treatment plants, has been the primary source of federal support for clean water infrastructure projects since its creation in 1987.

Studies by the EPA, the Congressional Budget Office, the Government Accountability Office, and the Water Infrastructure Network estimate a water infrastructure funding gap exceeding \$300 billion over the next 20 years.

Clean fresh drinking water is more important to the majority of Americans surveyed than any other issue surveyed. (Photo courtesy CSREES)



Because of this funding gap, the Association of Metropolitan Sewerage Agencies (AMSA) believes it is untenable for the federal government to cut support for clean water in America.

AMSA is urging Congress to support both full funding for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund in the short-term, and a dedicated trust fund to guarantee clean and safe water in America for the long-term.

Responding to the Bush budget proposal, AMSA's Executive Director Ken Kirk said, "This proposed cut is the wrong measure at the wrong time. Without a long-term, sustainable federal-state-local partnership, communities will not be able to tackle essential capital replacement projects needed to meet federal Clean Water Act mandates and improve the quality of the nation's

waters.”

Kirk points out that Congress has established trust funds supported by dedicated revenue sources for highway infrastructure at \$30 billion/year, and airport infrastructure at \$8 billion/year. AMSA believes these trust funds provide a strong precedent for moving forward with a similar fund for clean and safe water.

“Clean and safe water is certainly as important to the nation’s economic and public health as our highways and airports,” said Kirk.

AMSA, together with other stakeholder groups, will work "aggressively" with Congress and the Bush administration, said Kirk, to ensure full funding for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund and to establish a trust fund dedicated to clean and safe water in America.

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