

Chasing Presidents: Biden, Inslee

By Joe Wilkinson

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For a week or so every four years, the center of the political universe sits squarely on the east side of Des Moines. That is where a steady stream of presidential candidates trek past the various food-on-a-stick booths, livestock barns, 4-H displays and displays that are the Iowa State Fair.

Over the next couple weeks, I'll feature comments from candidates, who hit "The Fair." The attraction of 100,000 daily attendees over 10 straight days is a powerful draw for presidential hopefuls. It also spawns town halls, multi-candidate debates and other meet, greet and get-to-know-them sessions throughout the area.

For this column, I am approaching as many candidates as I can find—to ask her or him specifically about the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). The question also prompts other climate related comments in a heated presidential campaign. In some cases, it takes me outside the fairground gates.

Up first this week? Former Vice President—and long time U.S. Senator from Delaware—Joe Biden. In a field with two dozen Democratic candidates, Biden has been leading many of the early preference polls, with Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders on his heels.

With a crowded opening of his Iowa City campaign office on a sweltering night last week, most of us could not get close to him. Again, at the state fair, with dozens of news media from around the country (and various foreign media) I was steamrolled again.

But I knew he would be at the Boone County Fairgrounds later in the day. I showed up there, where there still was a crowd of 200, along with about 35 reporters with cameras or microphones. As his remarks ended, Biden waded into the crowd. He likes to spend a few seconds with as many attendees as he can, answering their question, posing with them for a selfie, or just thanking them for coming. I worked around to the apparent exit point and was the last one to speak to him.

The question again? According to the 2019 United Nations (UN) report on biodiversity, we now face the sixth mass extinction in Earth's history. A million species may go extinct over the next few decades, due to pollution, habitat loss and climate change. In the news, we've seen starving orcas and polar bears; and plastics pulled from the stomachs of marine species.

Such losses harm our economies, health and quality of life. As President, will you uphold our Endangered Species Act and better fund it, to protect imperiled plants and animals? I got in a very abbreviated query.

"Yes I will, and I did my whole career," Biden replied. "By the way, the new endangered species is the human being because of global warming."

The UN biodiversity report with 1,060 species cited in North America alone? I asked.

"Alone! You're exactly right," he agreed. "And if you go back and look, in 1986, I introduced the first major global warming bill. Check



Former Vice President Joe Biden wades through the crowd at the Boone County Fairgrounds, July 9. It was one of Biden's stops in a weekend that saw over 20 candidates appear at the Iowa State Fair, a political spotlight event in Clear Lake, and at side appearances throughout the state. (photos by Joe Wilkinson)



Washington Governor and Democratic Presidential candidate Jay Inslee gets his turn (Saturday, Aug. 10) at the Iowa State Fair Soapbox. About 20 candidates took their turn at the traditional 'straw bale stage' set up outside the fair's administration building over the past weekend.

on it; that's what I talked about back then."

He wanted to stay longer to talk, but was being tugged away by his staff. He gave me the website to check on details... and was directed through one of the empty livestock barns, toward his next stop, the 20-candidate "Clear Lake Wing Ding" event in Clear Lake.

Next in line this week? Washington Governor Jay Inslee.

Inslee came up through the state's legislature and served a term in the U.S. House in the 1990s. He headed then-President Clinton's Health and Human Services Department also. More recently, Inslee chaired the Democratic Governors Association and co-chaired the United States Climate Alliance. Inslee has made combatting climate change his priority.

His climate and energy plans include a phase out of fossil fuel production in the U.S. as the country moves to clean energy. I talked with him earlier this summer, at a "climate conversation" in Cedar Rapids hosted by State Senator Rob Hogg. Inslee talked to Iowa again, last week, at the state fair.

In our conversation, Inslee recalled that his first public foray into the environment, focused on a tiny fish, across the country, in the crosshairs of a 1970s Little Tennessee River dam construc-

tion project. Eventually, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the federal Endangered Species Act explicitly forbade the completion of construction projects if the Interior Department decided it would result in the elimination of a species... the snail darter.

Climate? The environment? They go way back for Inslee. "Yes. It's funny... the first thing I ever said in public, about anything, was about the snail darter. I wrote a letter to the editor. ESA was under attack, right? I wrote a letter to the editor, and I won—I was very proud—'the letter to the editor of the month' award from the Yakima Republic. Probably the biggest achievement I ever had," Inslee suggested.

More seriously? Inslee confirmed he supports the ESA and adequate funding. "Oh, totally, but we need to understand, it's not enough. I mean, we can have the ESA, but if climate change eats the ecosystem alive, you know, we have to start planning. We can have the strongest ESA, but if we don't stop climate change, and we lose these ecosystems, (realize that) habitat is everything; Without habitat, you don't have the species. That's why I care about it."

Inslee is banking on climate and environment being his calling card to the White House.