

## ALTERNATIVE ENERGY AND THE AMERICAS

# Greener Americas

by Harley Shaiken

President Obama sought to turn the page both symbolically and substantively on the United States' relations with its southern neighbors during his first visit to Latin America. While much of the news coverage centered on his new Cuban travel initiatives and his stop in Mexico to bolster President Felipe Calderón in the drug wars, Obama also addressed the critical issues of energy and the environment during his four-day trip.

In his opening remarks at the Fifth Summit of the Americas, held April 17–19 in Trinidad and Tobago, President Obama proposed a new Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas:

Each country will bring its own unique resources and needs, so we will ensure that each country can maximize its strengths as we promote efficiency and improve our infrastructure, share technologies, support investments in renewable sources of energy. And in doing so, we can create the jobs of the future, lower greenhouse gas emissions and make this hemisphere a model for cooperation.

The week after the summit, the president reiterated his commitment to alternative energy during a visit to a wind turbine tower plant located on the site of a shuttered Maytag appliance factory in Newton, Iowa. He candidly pointed out how far the U.S. has to go in the area of renewable energy. “Today, America produces less than 3 percent of our electricity through renewable sources like wind and solar,” he said, in spite of the fact that “we pioneered solar technology.” The president pointed to a potential source of funds for moving forward both domestically and in the hemisphere: the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which earmarks \$15 billion annually for a decade to develop clean energy, including solar and wind power.

The combined momentum created by the president's visits to Latin America and Iowa has led to high expectations for energy policy change both at home and abroad. The challenge will be to demonstrate progress during this time of economic crisis and scarce resources.

In order to build on the initiatives laid out by President Obama, I propose a new Alliance for Green Prosperity which would incorporate the best elements of FDR's Good Neighbor Policy and JFK's Alliance for Progress. In addition to energy and the environment, it could focus on



La Ventosa, Latin America's largest windfarm, in Oaxaca, Mexico.

jobs and development. An appropriate place to inaugurate the Alliance would be where the U.S. and Latin America meet: the border. Building a solar installation in the desert bridging the U.S.–Mexico border would underscore the fact the sun's power can create jobs and prosperity and is unlimited and available to all.

As a start, the Alliance for Green Prosperity would have six components that integrate existing initiatives with new ideas:

**1. Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas.** The program that President Obama announced at the summit could highlight new research and working technologies from universities, national laboratories and innovative private sector firms throughout the Americas. It could also provide a forum for officials in which they could consider tax, regulatory and subsidy policies to increase the production of alternative fuels and make them more competitive with fossil fuels. In this way, countries could



Photo by Daniel Bedallia

compare their experiences with various techniques and better understand the advantages and disadvantages of each in meeting their particular needs.

**2. Clean Energy Deployment Program.** The U.S. would contribute to a new green infrastructure fund to provide loan guarantees and, in some cases, grants for the development of new projects. The use of stimulus funds to create green jobs is both appropriate and critical. The U.S. would also use its influence in international funding agencies, such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank, to coordinate and expand funding for the construction of new alternative energy projects in the hemisphere. Solar, wave, geothermal, wind and biomass energy research efforts would be strategically positioned across the Americas in much the same way that regional ocean energy research sites are chosen by the European Union.

**3. Buy Green in the Americas.** The Alliance would include a commitment by national governments to “buy green.” For

example, the U.S. government could agree to install solar panels on the roofs of all new federally funded buildings. The Recovery Act already mandates the purchase of 17,600 fuel-efficient vehicles for the federal fleet. A pledge of this sort would create both a powerful symbol of the effectiveness of new technologies and the economies of scale necessary to drive down production costs, making these technologies more competitive and speeding their diffusion. Given that governments are the largest consumers of goods, services and energy in the hemisphere, this action alone would drive economic opportunities up and prices down across the clean energy landscape.

**4. Re-Power the Americas.** In the United States, the demand for alternative energy technologies could be met by converting unused manufacturing capacity, such as idled auto plants in the Midwest, thereby utilizing existing skills and creating much-needed jobs. In particular, solar manufacturing and advanced battery production could play a central role. This conversion to the new energy economy could be encouraged with tax incentives and retraining allowances, becoming a model to be replicated throughout the Americas.

In Central America, Costa Rica is aiming for carbon neutrality by 2021. Chile is already exploring solar as a major energy source and an engine for job growth. Models such as these should be aided, developed and diffused.

**5. Energy Cooperation Pacts.** A small number of highly visible projects could be launched that capture the spirit of the Alliance. For example, solar schools could be built throughout the hemisphere and cross-border wind farms could be installed on the Nicaragua–Costa Rica border (perhaps on the site of the once-proposed “peace park”) as well as on the U.S.–Canada border.

**6. Green Roads Out of Poverty:** A major issue in poor communities across the Americas and around the world is the energy needs of the poor. These needs are largely unmet by the renewable energy research programs emerging across the region. A special research and deployment program would be created to specifically address the needs of the poor, focusing on efforts like those to dramatically reduce the costs of solar home energy systems as well as ancillary technologies such as water purification and solar- and wind-powered refrigeration.

An Alliance for Green Prosperity could rebuild the strained and neglected relationship between the United States and the other countries of the hemisphere by tackling three of the defining issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: energy, development and the environment.

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