

Its' the Environment- Reflections on 2011

ESC is a small group of five professionals in the environmental field, but we read the news and have other interests beyond the confines of our contracted work. So, I asked everyone in the office what some of the notable environmental issues have been in the year that ends in a few days. Some of the notable events will have changes far beyond this year and next. Other notable events just began in 2011 and will carry on for years to come, with uncertain consequences.

Everyone at ESC agreed that the natural disasters in Japan, leading to the nuclear contamination and power plant failure has to be on the list. Societies have a huge lesson to learn from this series of events in Japan, particularly that human design, engineering and construction are still no match for the most severe that natural systems can throw at us. We mourn with the people and communities who lost so much in Japan, and hope that better decisions will follow. Our experience in Virginia was small by comparison, but we learned that we CAN have a record-breaking earthquake and a major hurricane in the same short period. In fact, as the year began and now ends, there is no shortage of natural disaster stories in the world news.

The US Congress proposed monumental cuts to the EPA budget for the next year- cuts beyond those already proposed by the White House. The House cuts would reduce the 2012 budget by \$233 million from last year and \$534 million from the President's request. Such cuts will cripple EPA and eliminate the ability to even meet the statutory requirements that come from Congressional action in the first place. EPA enforcement, inspection and oversight will be affected; research will be reduced and standards will be updated less often.

Just days ago, EPA announced that coal fired power plants will have to reduce mercury emissions as well as reduce emissions of other toxic chemicals. Older coal-fired power plants will finally have to come in line with the performance standards of other electric generating facilities, including and especially newer coal fired power plants. Coal fired power plants that have been operating for decades without modern pollution control will have to upgrade or close- at long last. The regulations are similar to getting the older cars off the highway because they spew black smoke and leave a trail of soot.

We have watched in 2011 as world food and water supplies are threatened, air quality improves somewhat in the US and is horrible overseas. Too many marine fish, mammals and other species are threatened by over fishing or destructive practices. And subsistence fisher persons across the nation and the globe continue to consumer contaminated fish because it is their only source of protein. Coastal water quality remains poor in dozens of places, not the least of which includes the Gulf of Mexico, recovering from the massive oil spill in 2010.

Next week we will take a break and the following week, January 9th, write about what we see coming at and to us in 2012.

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