

It's The Environment- At Last! What might we expect in 2012?

One of the graduate classes I teach at Virginia Commonwealth University in the Center for Environmental Studies is a survey class and every person has an assignment to present environmental stories from the popular press. The stories come from local, state, national and international events in the past few days or week. When the course was first taught, in the 1990's, students watched the news for a week and could find something to discuss. Now, the same assignment is easily accomplished in any given 24 hour period with environmental stories from conventional print media, broadcast media and electronic media. The environment, as a topic, is now at the top of the news list on a regular basis, from global warming to pesticides in orange juice to wetland regulations, rising sea level, and so much more. Even if prognosticating remains a chancy proposition, I will give it a try.

The Earth Summit 2012 is coming up in June 2012 in Rio de Janeiro and we have every reason to expect certain themes: global warming and other climate changes issues, inequities among the nations, protection of important natural resources, providing basic human needs of food, water, health care. The 1992 Earth Summit was held in Rio and produced Agenda 21 that articulated a precautionary approach and called on greater equity among the developed and developing nations. The aspirations of Agenda 21 remain unmet.

The US budget will pressure EPA and the natural resource agencies to slow or cut activities, including some innovations that are sorely needed. Budget pressures are already raising the work loads and limiting the extent to which program offices at EPA are able to carry out their mission and Congressional mandates in the form of federal law. If the current budget conditions persist, then the anti-government forces will succeed and we will lose protections for human health and ecosystems.

The "affected interests" are already running to court to halt or overturn some of the progress that EPA has made in clean air and clean water measures. EPA has, for example, issued requirements for old coal fired power plants that will save lives and improve the quality of life for many of us. These health protections and improvements in environmental quality are worth more than the financial costs of compliance, which, by the way, create jobs when companies build new and improved equipment. These provisions will undoubtedly end up in court.

We expect to hear more about jobs vs. the environment in the context of environmental improvements costing jobs or corporate profits. I, for one, am tired of this old and false dichotomy between the economy and environmental protection. Years ago, MIT researchers found that economic improvements depend on environmental improvements and protections- the economy and the environment are directly related- they rise and fall together. My colleague Paul

Templet at LSU published several papers in the 1992-1994 era on the economy/environment relationship. One paper is in Environmental Science and Technology.

New initiatives in the area of green chemistry will one day yield some startling new compounds that are not a threat to human health and the environment. We cannot tell when that day will come, but it must be getting closer.

Microbes are able to adapt and evolve faster than green chemists, and one of the consequences of attacking microbes with antibiotics and using antibiotics so widely in agriculture is the development of resistance in bacteria and fungi. This change may result in some completely unexpected diseases or infections in people or wildlife. Soon we will regret the profligate use of antibiotics.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Peter L. deFur at ESC, LLC
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