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PRACTITIONER'S CORNER

A Conversation With NRDC's Greg Wetstone

Interviewed by Dave Newman

Greg Wetstone is the Director of Programs for the Natural Resources Defense Council ("NRDC") and has been with NRDC since 1995. Before that he worked for Representative Henry Waxman, a California congressman.

SDLP: What does NRDC do?

Wetstone: We play a key role in the effort to grapple with our most serious environmental challenges. These days we are spending a lot of time trying to hold onto the very important bedrock structure that has worked since 1970. NRDC played a huge role in getting these laws into the books and now we are fighting like hell to hold onto them.

SDLP: EPA just released a state of the environment report which basically hails many of the victories of the last 30 years and attributes much of that success to the nation's environmental laws. It seems quite ironic that the Bush Administration simultaneously praises the efficacy of the nation's environmental laws as it works to weaken them. Are you surprised that there's not more of a backlash against Administration's environmental policies?

Wetstone: I think there will be. I think there has been. I think we're living in a time where the Administration is relying largely on distraction and almost recognizes that they have almost no real ability to make a public case with any sort of credible detail. I think there is right now a very systematic effort to try to undermine the very infrastructure that makes these laws work and it's a brazen disregard for science and a brazen disregard for law and a brazen disregard for public opinion. I think the truth will come out. History shows that these things tend to be cyclical and public attention will turn inward as I think it already has.

SDLP: One of the surprising things post 9-11 was the lack of discussion around the connection between our foreign policy and our dependence on unsustainable forms of energy. Do you see a more coherent foreign policy that incorporates environmental sustainability as one of the key components? Do you see that articulated in any context across the political social spectrum? Do you hear anyone speaking about that?

Wetstone: I think that there are a lot of people who are speaking to the importance of the connection between sustainable energy policy and national security because by

reducing our reliance on unstable regions of the world for energy, we are also reducing our reliance on an energy path that leads us to greater pollution, greater global warming - and that is not something we can sustain over the long term if we want to protect the planet's climate. You could point to John Kerry, Joe Lieberman, John McCain in the Senate. Henry Waxman and Sherry Boehlert in the House. A number of champions of provisions that reduce reliance on foreign oil over time. I think the country after 9-11 was looking to the President for leadership and had the President been willing to show leadership, to ask for sacrifice, to urge Americans to reduce reliance on imported oil, to take that provision to Congress, I think we'd have a law today that would help with these problems. Unfortunately, where we have been is a very different place, where, in many ways, the financial rewards for oil companies has been a more important factor than the long term public interest in either environment or security.

SDLP: Some people have said that 9-11 created an incredible moment and an opportunity to create a sea change in our nation's energy policy. Do you think there is still an opportunity to make those kind of grand sweeping changes and pull the country along from this point?

Wetstone: Yeah, I do. I think that we need leadership that shares the objective of reducing our reliance on foreign oil and I think that it is clear that there is a high price to pay including in human life for continuing to bolster instead of reduce our reliance on foreign oil. In the long term, if we want to leave a planet to our children that's better than the one we came into, we've got some work to do and this is an important part of it.

SDLP: On the domestic front, with all of the attacks that we are currently seeing on environmental laws and regulations, is it hard to keep moving forward trying to build upon the environmental successes of the past 30 years while you are playing such a defensive role?

Wetstone: That's one of the great tragedies of the time we're in. While it has never been more important to be moving forward, we are forced to devote tremendous attention and resources simply to keep from moving backward on programs that are broadly popular and broadly successful and that we should be building on. Instead we see constant efforts to undermine these programs. It is hard to keep moving forward, but we are looking at other places. For example, we have

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legislation in California on motor vehicles' contribution to global warming that's very important. We are looking for opportunities to change the dynamic and elevate this as an issue and really get focused on how to make progress.

SDLP: If you were a member of Congress, what would be the first piece of legislation that you would introduce?

Wetstone: I have the continual opportunity to work with members of Congress to get the kind of legislation that we need. We have good legislation in Congress, it just doesn't go anywhere. The issue is really the leadership in Congress and the leadership in the White House. We need the ability to move us forward on these issues. Drafting the bill and getting it out there isn't the hard part.

SDLP: How do you see the tactics used by most environmental organizations like NRDC evolving in the future to meet the growing opposition and sophistication of the tools used by the opposition?

Wetstone: I think we're doing a much better job than we ever had with the resources that we have. I think we're being more strategic, that we're relying on new tools that are bring us along. The Internet and the tremendous network of activists that we've developed in the last 5 years is something that we didn't have. More sophisticated message development and that kind of thing and much better collaboration amongst groups, but we're facing a lot more money, more than we ever have. I think the foxes have taken over the henhouse. We have people running the White House and running the Congress who are basically willing to do precisely the bidding of not just corporate polluters, but the absolute least responsible, worst elements on every issue, be it logging, air pollution, or global warming. That's the problem.

SDLP: Many economists have argued that we could do away with a lot of the regulation if we simply internalized the external costs of pollution into the costs of goods and services that we use. We have seen some encouraging results in some very limited cases that have taken this approach. But how do you popularize such a complex kind of explanation for raising prices on goods and services?

Wetstone: I think it becomes an academic discussion. Yes, it would be a more efficient system if we could internalize the costs, but what is the true cost? How much is a clear day worth? How much is it worth for your child to not have asthma? Where we have this kind of economic analysis playing a role we see tremendous data manipulation. We see that now at the White House, where their efforts to promote approaches

that devalue the lives of senior citizens, we see proposals that only look to the lost value in monetary terms and don't consider quality of life, don't consider what it's worth to protect wilderness, to have a clear day, what's it worth to have a bald eagle.

The problem with these theories is that they put you in a structure that can easily be manipulated and we have a system that has dramatically improved our quality of life, as EPA's Report seeks to document, in reducing the pollution in our cities, cleaning up our rivers, protecting animals on the verge of extinction, protecting the ozone layer. All of which, by the way, is at risk by proposals moving in the current Administration. We have a structure that has basically worked and we should build on it, rather than tear it down. That's the problem, we're looking to tear down the foundation that we should be building on, and when we build on that foundation, we can do it in economically efficient ways.