

Science in Policymaking

A summary of Washington Policy Center's 2011 Environmental Policy Conference

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Washington Policy Center held its 9th Annual Environmental Policy Conference and Luncheon July 21st at the Bell Harbor Conference Center on the Seattle waterfront. The event focused on free-market approaches to environmental policy based on scientific research, accountability and innovation.

The four-part conference featured an introductory presentation by Todd Myers, director of WPC's Center for the Environment; a panel discussion on the role of science in environmental policymaking; a panel on environmental priorities for water policy in Washington; and a keynote address from Dr. Patrick Moore, co-founder and former member of Greenpeace. Additionally, Washington Policy Center honored the work of Long Live the Kings, a Seattle-based non-profit organization committed to improving salmon and steelhead populations, with the 2011 Environmental Innovator Award.

The conference provided more than 250 attendees with critical insight into environmental issues in Washington State. Several Washington policymakers also participated, including state legislators, agency administrators and local officials. In addition to the summary below, the conference may be viewed on WPC's website thanks to TVW.¹

Breakfast Presentation

Todd Myers, Director, WPC's Center for the Environment and author of Eco-Fads: How the Rise of Trendy Environmentalism Is Harming the Environment

Todd Myers began the conference by describing the problem facing environmental policymaking. Myers noted policymakers often fail to create policies based on scientific evidence. Instead, he said environmental decisions are made to protect the perceived high moral standing and ideology of environmentalists. While this approach makes people feel good about their intentions and their actions, it does not necessarily help the environment. Myers also discussed how this attachment to eco-fads has actively harmed Washington's environment in many cases.

In order to overcome the failure of our current approach, Myers emphasized that we must first acknowledge the problem itself. Policymakers and the public must ask why we make the decisions we do. We need to acknowledge the powerful social, moral and ideological motives that influence environmental decision making. Otherwise, he said, we will continue to support policies that actually endanger the environment. Without a firm reliance on scientific research and measurements, our policies are based on nothing more than the concerns and interests of politicians and the public.

¹ www.washingtonpolicy.org/events/details/9th-annual-environmental-policy-conference

Myers noted that Washingtonians are beginning to realize our environmental efforts are not helping the environment. In part because of the economic costs of Washington's current policies, and the fact that the state is facing harrowing budget deficits, Myers believes Washingtonians are ready for an alternate environmental policy.

This alternative, Myers said, will include three components, which must be embraced by the public. First an effective policy must be economical. What is good for the environment should serve the economy as well. Second, it must be fast and nimble, allowing environmental decisions to be made near the environment. Third, it must be accountable to scientific standards and objective measurements.

Summary Points:

1. Environmental policy is too often driven by considerations other than science.
2. Policymakers must acknowledge the shortcomings of current environmental policymaking.
3. Washingtonians are ready for an economical, responsive and accountable policy approach to the environment.

Panel I: The Role of Science in Environmental Policymaking

- *Alex Berezow, Ph.D., Editor, RealClearScience.com*
- *Norman MacLeod, Owner and CEO, Gaelic Wolf Consulting*
- *Hans Zeiger, State Representative, R-Puyallup*
- *Moderated by Todd Myers, Director, WPC's Center for the Environment*

Following his initial remarks, Myers introduced the first panel with an explanation of how politicians apply science to policymaking. The current process is exactly backwards, he said. Legislators pass laws and expect science to confirm the environmental effectiveness of those laws after the fact.

Dr. Alex Berezow then kicked off the science panel by presenting his insights as a scientist. He argued that distortions are bound to occur whenever politics and science intersect. However, scientific research should always be assumed to be honest. If we do not accept scientists' work, we essentially question their integrity. If a scientist's research is faulty or dishonest, Dr. Berezow assured the audience it will be discovered and disproven soon enough.

Dr. Berezow admitted it is difficult to accept science as honest and that suspicion of science continues to increase for several reasons. First, media thrive by generating conflict, condensing complex concepts into sound bites, and over reporting popular issues. Second, political partisanship encourages people to discredit scientific research that does not align with their political ideology. Third, observers are inclined to attack the scientist, not the research. Fourth, the internet, though it offers advantages, often disseminates incorrect information and confirms readers' biases.

Next Norm MacLeod offered a different opinion of scientific credibility. Too often, he claimed, scientists attach personal values to their research. MacLeod argued, therefore, that science used by state officials should undergo rigorous verification. He suggested Washington legislators create a process of scientific peer review within state government, like that proposed in House Bill 1307 during the 2011 legislative session.

This bill would have required state agencies to use only peer-reviewed science to support public policy and would set out specific qualifications for peer-

reviewed materials. Although HB 1307 did not pass, MacLeod said that he will continue to fight for more scrutiny of science in Washington State. “The regulated community,” MacLeod concluded, “deserves fully verified, accurate science, pertinent to the issues at hand.”

To conclude the first panel, Rep. Hans Zeiger discussed science as it affects Olympia, administrative agencies and local environmental stewardship. In Olympia, he explained, scientific knowledge plays a limited role compared to the concerns and interests of constituents. At one point during the 2011 legislative session, he remembered calling a phosphate scientist to find out whether certain chemicals should be prohibited as a pending bill proposed. The scientist assured him there was no environmental threat and that the phosphates targeted by the bill do not affect groundwater quality as proponents claimed. Yet the bill passed handily without consideration of credible scientific testimony.

In other cases, Rep. Zeiger explained, legislators do not even decide policies that pertain to science. They simply delegate their lawmaking responsibility to administrative agencies. In effect, he observed, we have turned administrative scientists into policymakers, creating a system that repeatedly takes power away from even the most qualified local stewards who would otherwise care for the environment as private individuals.

Summary Points:

1. Dr. Alex Berezow is concerned that too many people discredit scientific research for ideological or political reasons, but that often science is honest and should be trusted.
2. Norm MacLeod believes there should be a more rigorous scientific review process at the policymaking level.
3. Rep. Hans Zeiger discussed how too often administrative environmentalism supplants the responsibilities of state and local policymakers.

Panel II: Environmental Priorities for Water Policy

- *Chris Townsend, Special Assistant to the Executive Director, Puget Sound Partnership*
- *Maia Bellon, Manager, Department of Ecology Water Resources Program*
- *Kathleen Collins, Washington Water Policy Alliance*
- *Moderated by Brandon Houskeeper, Analyst, WPC’s Center for the Environment*

In introducing the panel discussion on environmental priorities for water policy, moderator Brandon Houskeeper noted that while water issues are not new, they play a significant role in the ongoing environmental debate in Washington. With increasing demand and continued growth, the state of Washington faces challenging questions regarding both water availability and water quality.

In Western Washington no body of water is as important as the Puget Sound. To discuss this topic, Chris Townsend spoke about the work of Puget Sound Partnership (PSP). The legislature created PSP in 2007 to coordinate the restoration of the Puget Sound by 2020.

Townsend acknowledged the immense difficulty and ambiguity of this project, but he spoke highly of PSP’s approach. First, he made a case for the Puget Sound’s importance to the business community and PSP’s willingness to seek out the involvement of business leaders. Second, he outlined the goals of PSP, which include prioritizing recovery projects, implementing accountability methods, and supporting partner organizations with strategic funding. Third, he spoke about

two PSP special projects addressing stormwater management and compensatory mitigation. Townsend concluded by encouraging the audience to be involved in PSP's ongoing work.

The other two panelists discussed another critical aspect of water in Washington that is often overlooked: water rights. Maia Bellon, program manager for the state's Department of Ecology Water Resources Program, spoke from the state's perspective on how to meet the challenges of growing demand, and Kathleen Collins, a long-time advocate for private water users with the Washington Water Policy Alliance, offered solutions to improve the state's water permitting process.

Bellon explained the network of water programs at Ecology, and described her program's difficult task of issuing water permits while ensuring adequate water supplies for previous permit holders. These two responsibilities often conflict, leaving permit seekers waiting for years to receive new permits or permit transfers. According to Washington's 1917 water laws, which she explained are outdated and in need of revision, the earliest water claimant receives a guarantee to water as it is continually used. This means new permits can be issued only when the state can verify there is enough water to serve all permit holders. Bellon explained this requires funding that her program does not have. She suggested allocating more money to alleviate this need and reworking the state's antiquated water laws.

Kathleen Collins added facts that display the depth of this problem. Nearly 7,000 applicants are currently waiting for new or transferred water permits. Only about 500 permits are issued each year. Some applicants have waited 10 to 15 years. In response to Bellon's proposals for change, Kathleen said the permitting process could be more efficient and, while she supports the idea of a modernized water law, she hesitated to move too quickly to undo the protections of the 1917 law.

Collins concluded with five areas that should be improved. These include: encouraging flexibility for permit transfers and changes, allowing third-party reviews to expedite permit applications, revising the current relinquishment rules that punish permit holders for conserving water, creating better information systems, and adopting a more efficient appeals process.

Summary Points:

1. Water quality and quantity is a critical issue in every part of the state.
2. The Puget Sound Partnership needs to continue working toward project prioritization and performance accountability.
3. Distributing water permits and monitoring groundwater supplies will continue to be a contentious problem under the current system.
4. Use of third-party review could help reduce permit waiting periods.

Keynote Luncheon

Patrick Moore, Ph.D., co-founder and former member of Greenpeace and author of Confessions of a Greenpeace Dropout: The Making of a Sensible Environmentalist

Before Dr. Patrick Moore spoke, Washington Policy Center recognized the work of the Seattle-based non-profit group Long Live the Kings (LLTK) with the annual Environmental Innovator Award. LLTK has greatly improved salmon and steelhead populations around the Northwest over the past 25 years, bringing together land owners, scientists and policymakers to focus on hatchery

technologies and spawning habitats. Todd Myers presented the award plaque to Jacques White, Executive Director of LLTK, which read, “For private innovation of science-based protection and restoration of salmon and steelhead to the Pacific Northwest.”

Dr. Moore began his presentation with his story, based on his experiences before, during and after his involvement with Greenpeace. Nature has always interested him, he said, partly because he grew up in a timber and fishing community. This led him to study forestry and ecology in British Columbia. There, in the 1970s, he met the friends with whom he founded Greenpeace. Their first mission was to Alaska to protest hydrogen bomb test sites. As he said, “we won.” Next, the group protested the destruction of whales and baby seals, and they won again.

In 1979, the group founded Greenpeace International and Dr. Moore became one of six directors. Over the next couple of years, however, Dr. Moore, the only scientist in the organization, said he realized the group was letting political advocacy overcome scientific evidence. This became unmistakably clear when Greenpeace vowed to ban chlorine worldwide. Dr. Moore fought the decision, saying that chlorine was on the periodic table, is a natural building block of the universe, and is responsible for major advancements in clean drinking water and medicine in the modern world. When his colleagues refused his counsel Dr. Moore decided it was time to part ways with Greenpeace. He left the organization in 1986.

Since then, Dr. Moore has continued to study and care for the environment and has developed firm positions in every field of environmental policy. He supports aggressive forestry, noting timber and woody materials are the most abundant renewable resource on the planet. He advocates hydroelectric power as one of the most renewable, reliable and clean ways to produce electricity. Dr. Moore also discussed his support for nuclear energy, noting it is 27 percent safer than other heavy industries and that it produces abundant clean energy.

Dr. Moore said he hopes more people will take an interest in geothermal technologies, which quickly repay up-front costs. He firmly supports genetic modification of plants, explaining that it has unquestionably improved the quantity and quality of food around the world.

Summary Points:

1. Long Live the Kings received the 2011 Environmental Innovator Award for its success in improving salmon and steelhead populations.
2. As a scientist, Dr. Moore questioned the political advocacy of Greenpeace, the group he co-founded.
3. Dr. Moore argued policymakers and the public need to reconsider policies that limit forest use, hydroelectricity, nuclear energy and genetic modification of plants.

Ben Shelton is a Research Assistant with Washington Policy Center as part of WPC's Doug and Janet True Internship Program. WPC is a non-partisan, independent policy research organization in Washington state. Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body. For more information, visit washingtonpolicy.org.