



FOOTNOTES

EPA'S POPULATION NON-POLICY

The Environmental Protection Agency heretofore has shown no interest in population growth as a cause of environmental problems, and recent remarks by its new administrator suggest that the situation has not improved.

EPA Chief Carol Browner may be at the head of her class in technical knowledge and administrative skill, but an exchange with environmental journalists indicates she is in urgent need of education on the importance of population growth in the nation's ability to achieve environmental goals.

This is a serious gap. Not only is demography a major source of the problems that EPA itself must address but, since President Clinton is abolishing the Council on Environmental Quality, EPA is in line to be the agency primarily responsible for seeing that other government agencies prepare environmental impact statements (EIS) on their activities, under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). That act attached great importance to the population issue. The record has been spotty in translating this importance into environmental impact statements, but efforts to beef up the population aspects had begun to show promise of bearing fruit under the Bush administration last year.

Browner's inarticulateness on population themes is surprising in view of her job history. She has worked for years with and around environmental advocates, including then-Sen. Al Gore. Recently, as Florida's top environmental officer, she had to deal with problems resulting in large part from that state's six-fold population increase since World War II.

Yet, when asked if the EPA needs a person or department that specializes in population issues, Browner said she couldn't imagine why.

Browner met with a few dozen members of the Society of Environmental Journalists and the D.C. Science Writers' Association on the evening of May 18. She was impressive fielding highly technical questions and in articulating her goals for the next four years. She said the nation was ending the first phase of its quest for environmental quality. During that phase, 13 major acts have set "end-of-stream" standards, she said.

"The huge gains (from end-of-the-pollution-stream enforcement) have been realized now," said Browner. Although EPA will need to see that those gains are main-

tained, "we need to move upstream to prevent pollution from taking place in the first place."

That seemed to be a perfect opening for talking about population growth which may be the most important "upstream" contributor to negative environmental impact.

I noted to the EPA chief that concern about multiplying the agents of pollution was a key part of the National Environmental Protection Act of 1969. Dealing with population growth was integral to the landmark act, as it was to mainstream environmental thinking at the time. Reflecting that, NEPA's opening "Declaration" began:

"The Congress, recognizing the profound impact of man's activity on the interrelations of all components of the natural environment, **particularly the profound influences of population growth, high-density urbanization**, industrial expansion, resource exploitation . . . declares that it is the continuing policy of the Federal government . . . to create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony . . . (emphasis added)."

NEPA set up the Council on Environmental Quality which was to establish rules for environmental impact statements and help the President with an annual report that, among other things, would assess the "adequacy of available natural resources for fulfilling human and economic requirements of the Nation **in the light of expected population pressures** (emphasis added)."

But the Council on Environmental Quality never formulated strong rules forcing the federal government to assess how any project or policy might increase population and what environmental impact that growth would cause.

Last year as U.S. population was soaring more than 50 million higher than the level at passage of the 1969 NEPA, three environmentalists lobbied the general counsel of Bush's Council on Environmental Quality to start paying attention to population growth, said Dale Didion, executive director of Renew America.* The CEQ counsel was quite receptive and mapped out a sequence of events through which the change could occur, but the fall election halted all progress, Didion said.

Now, with the disappearance of the CEQ, EPA's Office of Federal Activities is in the process of inheriting the overall responsibility for the EIS process.

When asked if she will take the opportunity to require population impact assessments, Browner seemed confused, indicating no knowledge of the issue and finally stating, "I don't feel qualified to answer that."

Probing further for a sign of commitment or understanding of the population issue, I told her a personal story from a year ago. I had called EPA's public affairs office to be directed to an official or researcher who could talk about how population growth has affected efforts to achieve environmental goals. I was bounced from phone to phone, office to office and city to city over a couple of weeks. An official in the "mobile source air pollution" area told me: "We don't talk much about growth. We do talk about the number of cars. I think it generally is true that the (Bush) administration doesn't like to talk about population growth. You'll never get anybody in government suggesting communities meet air standards by limiting their population growth." When I asked incredulously if there wasn't at least somebody stuck away in a basement cranny who remembered the earlier ideas of controlling pollution through population stabilization, the official huffed that she certainly remembered "ZPG and all of that two-child family talk" but the idea of controlling population "just doesn't fly in a democratic country. Americans don't want you messing with their freedom. . . You seem really keen on pressing the population issues, but our agency does not deal in those issues. You need to talk to some environmental group, although I'm not sure they'd want to talk about it either." Feeling like Diogenes in his search for one honest man, I eventually gave up my quest for an EPA population expert.

Recounting that spirit of the Bush EPA, I asked Browner what changes she would make, especially in light of calls by some groups that EPA have a population department or at least a desk.

"I can't imagine what a population desk would do," Browner said. She allowed that air pollution officials, for example, certainly compute projected population in their calculations, but she had no thoughts to offer about how EPA might treat population growth as a variable that could be influenced rather than an inevitable factor to which EPA can only react.

I would offer the vision of a population desk that could have played a major role in 1990 by giving expert testimony to Congress about the population and environmental effects of passing the Immigration Act that year. As it was, Congress never discussed how much the Immigration Act's encourage-

ment of large scale population growth might undercut the Clean Air Act passed the very same week. And Browner — if she is responsible to the nation's children, including her 5-year-old son — must come up with a plan for how the nation will protect its environmental resources from the impact of the 383 million Americans projected by the Census Bureau for the year 2050. Much of that 130-million increase (from today) is the result of federal immigration policies since the 1969 NEPA was enacted. But neither the EPA nor the Council on Environmental Quality ever raised a word about it.

Population consciousness is not totally absent in the Clinton administration. Browner might do well to talk with Bruce Babbitt, Secretary of the Interior. In April, he addressed journalists at the National Press Club. Suggesting that much of Interior's task is rationing the natural resources on federal lands, I asked Babbitt how much more difficult it will be to ration among 383 million Americans than the 203 million at the time of the first Earth Day.

"That's just it," Babbitt immediately replied. "That (population growth) is at the root of all of our problems."

If population growth is so important, why had Babbitt failed to say a single word about it in his prepared text? Perhaps even officials who understand population growth implications eventually stop talking publicly about them because there is no formal process that calls upon them to address the population factor.

And perhaps in that line of thinking, EPA's Browner could begin to imagine a rationale for a population desk — and a policy requiring a population impact assessment of all other federal policies.

— Roy Beck, Washington Editor
The Social Contract Quarterly Journal

** For details concerning the inadequacy of the EIS procedures in dealing with population, see Joseph J. Brecher "Population and the 'EIS'". (NPG FORUM, May 1991). The three groups that approached CEQ in behalf of a larger coalition were Carrying Capacity Network, Negative Population growth, and the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund.*

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