

Transformation in Environmental Strategy Underway, Says CEQ Leader



Delivering an energetic and visionary message during a return appearance before the Recreation Exchange, James Connaughton, Chairman of the Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ), said that the administration is enthusiastic about opportunities still ahead and moving forward vigorously to implement its “transformative cooperative conservation strategy.” Through cooperative conservation, citizens play a central and substantive role in the stewardship and governance of the environments in which they live, work, and play. A host of initiatives await the confirmation of Dirk Kempthorne as Secretary of the Interior, Mr.

Connaughton reported, including a comprehensive cooperative conservation legislation package described as a framework for progress which he hopes will attract bipartisan support.

Focusing on his personal love of outdoor recreation, the CEQ leader noted that the recreation community “is about getting people out and interacting with the environment and with each other.” He related his personal experience that “an hour in” on a hike with his children, “the questions start coming.” Even as Americans seek to live closer to natural systems (50% of Americans now live within 50 miles of a coastline), he said, a connection with nature too often eludes us. Re-thinking how we manage access to our federal lands for recreation, he believes, is central to our need to achieve connectivity with nature and with each other.

For too long the federal lands management model has been to acquire natural resource assets and then to “lock them up” from the public in order to conserve them, he said. In contrast, the Bush administration’s goal is to match access with conservation. He explained that the White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation held last year in St. Louis focused on a new paradigm for the 21st century where collaboration and cooperation with the public are central to planning and managing federal land with the goal of involving the public early and often to work towards consensus.

Since the conference a number of steps have been taken by a senior policy group to move towards implementing the cooperative conservation vision.

Accomplishments include:

- introducing “Good Samaritan” liability legislation to allow communities and private partners to invest in the cleanup and re-use of abandoned mining sites on federal land that are valuable to recreation interests, but closed to the public because they are considered contaminated;

- publishing a compendium and guide to cooperative conservation and environmental conflict resolution available throughout the federal government and
- creating interactive cooperative conservation websites available internally (cooperativeconservation.gov) and to the public (cooperativeconservation.org).

Following his prepared remarks, Mr. Connaughton was asked about the prospects for real change in the federal land management bureaucracy. While managing change is difficult, he said, developing consensus strategies to harness appropriations-based resources will work. Fiscal realities do require that the federal government's environmental partner organizations work towards self-sustainability, he said, because "welfare conservation is not sustainable. The government won't fund any program forever."

Asked about the possibility that federal lands could be self-sustaining through a combination of income-producing strategies and activities, Mr. Connaughton said his vision is that the federal government would retain its ecologically significant lands, and return the land with high economic value to the private sector. He illustrated this with the example of Aspen and Vail, where these two types of lands are contiguous and the developed high-value economic land supports the conservation of the high-value ecological land. "It's time to begin this huge conversation and recreation interests are right in the middle of it, straddling both worlds. People expect change to be for the better," he noted, "and we have to show them there's a better way."

Congress established CEQ within the Executive Office of the President as part of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). The Council coordinates federal environmental efforts and works closely with agencies and other White House offices in the development of environmental policies and initiatives. The Council's Chair is appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate, and serves as the principal environmental policy adviser to the President. In addition, CEQ reports annually to the President on the state of the environment, oversees federal agency implementation of the environmental impact assessment process, and acts as a referee when agencies disagree over the adequacy of such assessments.

James Connaughton can be reached as follows:

The Honorable James Connaughton
Chairman, Council on Environmental Quality
Executive Office of the President
Room 360 EEOB
Washington, DC 20502
Phone: 202-456-6224 Fax: 202-456-2710

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