

It's The Environment! Earth Day 2015

More than 40 years ago, 45, to be precise, the first U.S. Earth Day was celebrated as the brain child of Senator Gaylord Nelson, who recruited Harvard student Denis Hayes to organize the effort. We can all look up the history and find the predictions and prognostications.

Much has changed in 45 years, present author included. Congress created the Environmental Protection Agency later that same year, and went on to pass the Clean Air Act in 1970. Subsequently, most of the federal environmental laws were enacted by Congress to be implemented by the EPA and the states: the Clean Water Act, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, Superfund, Marine Mammal Protection Act, Ocean Dumping Ban Act, Oil Pollution Prevention Act, Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Management Act, and more. Without cell phones, laptops, desktop computers, smart phones or tablets, the nation set about cleaning up its act. Despite cries that the economy would collapse, various industries would go bankrupt and the nation would regret environmental action, we have come a long way – baby.

We are not done yet, not by a long shot. A couple of areas stand out as major incomplete efforts, or abject failures, you be the judge. In both cases, and more, the explanation is simple: greed and the influence of interest groups with money. The Chesapeake Bay is far from “cleaned” or substantially repaired. Despite 35 years of the Bay program, and a plethora of regulations and efforts, much remains to be repaired. This is due to a failure to control major causes of pollution in the Bay-- runoff from farms and construction and urban streets and suburban yards. The farm industry and builders/developers have fought the Bay program tooth and nail to prevent control of runoff from their properties. Obviously these interest groups are more interested in their own profit than repairing a broken and dirty Chesapeake Bay.

The local farm, sustainable farm and small farm movement is changing their footprint by altering polluting practices, and it makes a difference. But in Virginia, the difference is small, because the total acreage of our new farming practices is small by comparison. The factory farms and massive row crop farms continue unabated, with the Farm Bureau in the lead. Too bad the Farm Bureau never saw the Bay cleanup as a good thing and the Bay program as partners. They cling to the past as buggy whip makers.

The other major piece of unfinished environmental business is control of toxic chemicals- known and unknown. The industry that makes chemicals for all sorts of uses also fights against controlling poisons- whether it's pesticides to kill things or plastics to

hold things or the many products manufactured for use in our daily lives that get into our bodies. Scientists have known for many years that chemicals not normally found in our bodies, or in nature, have a way of exerting nasty and insidious effects on living things. Despite the general and specific knowledge of toxicology and physiology, it has been full speed ahead pumping millions of pounds of chemicals into the world. The chemical industry fights against testing and anything that sounds like regulations. And the industry does all it can to get out of cleaning up past contamination, preferring to leave it alone or cover it up, all in the name of maintaining profits.

Fortunately, the Green Chemistry movement, hugely popular among future-thinking chemists and students who see an exciting and new path, is making inroads, albeit slowly. After all, it will take time and effort, or another major catastrophe, to turn the chemical industry with the likes of Dow, Dupont, Monsanto and the others.

Now we are subjected to the same “threats” of economic disaster and complaints about controlling greenhouse gases that were thrown out for every other environmental effort. Firstly, there is NO evidence that the economy will tank when the U.S. and the world reduce our carbon footprint. The evidence and experience is to the contrary. The U.S. is now witnessing a shift in energy supply systems that includes substantial increases in solar and wind power supplied energy, with a decrease in coal and oil as energy sources- good news that we need to continue.

On this Earth Day, my message to the next generation of environmental leaders is this: take the baton of leadership and run hard and fast on a wiser path. Remember that the naysayers who rail against the environment are just looking to line their own pockets. And the emperor who decries environmental repair and improvement- he or she is BUCK NAKED!

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