

This supplement to *EPA InSight* contains up-to-date policy information from the Administrator/Deputy Administrator to all EPA employees.

## PUBLIC HEALTH -- AN EPA IMPERATIVE

November 1993

EPA-175-N-93-025 ✓

Below is a speech given by **Administrator Carol Browner** to the American Public Health Association on October 27, 1993:

It is an honor to be with people who are on the front lines of protecting public health. We know that when the public health movement began in this country, it was in large part a movement for environmental sanitation. That movement paid great dividends in reducing the rate of infant mortality from infection, reducing the rate of tuberculosis from overcrowding and malnutrition, and reducing the rate of chronic lung disease from air pollution and dirty workplaces.

Yet somehow, in the past twenty years, the world of public health and the world of environmental protection have grown further apart. **It is time to bring public health practice back into what we do at EPA.**

EPA has always dealt with issues that affect public health--because whatever we do to our environment has a profound effect on our own wellbeing. Since coming to EPA, I have made it very clear that protecting public health is my top priority. I want to talk briefly today about what EPA and the Clinton Administration are doing to protect our global environment, and why these actions are so important to public health.

Both the President and I are convinced that, if we are truly to protect public health both in this country and around the world, **we need a new approach.**

First, we need **good science.** Science--including the work of public health scientists--must be the backbone of every one of our policies and decisions.

Second, whenever possible we must **prevent pollution**, not just clean it up after it happens. Just as public health efforts are based on the concept of health promotion and disease prevention, we at EPA must prevent environmental pollution at its source, rather than simply treating the problems after they occur.

What's more, when we diagnose environmental problems, we borrow a technique familiar to medicine: we look at the entire "body" of our patient--the planet. Just as your patients' heart conditions may be affected by another bodily system, our diagnosis must look at air pollution, water pollution, and toxic contamination of our land, and how they all interact.

Third, we need to **fix the process.** We must be absolutely committed to the goal of protecting the health of people and our natural resources, while incorporating a new measure of innovation and flexibility in how we reach that goal.

And fourth, we need to **involve many, many more people** in protecting their own health and their own environment. Particularly in minority and low-income communities, which are often in the most hazardous environments, we need to learn from the public health model of educating and empowering communities. We need to build better partnerships with state and local governments. There is no doubt in my mind that a local community can do a better job of protecting the local environment than a distant bureaucracy.

My vision is that we must take these principles of change and forge the most ambitious and aggressive agenda EPA has

ever seen. And in this I have the firm support of our President and Vice President. Whatever we do will have a tremendous impact on public health throughout the world. The U.S. casts a very long shadow. Every day, the average American consumes most of his or her own weight in fuel, food, paper, steel, and other basic materials. We account for less than five percent of the world's population, but we account for 25 percent of the consumption of fossil fuels. Americans throw away twice as much garbage per person as West Europeans or Japanese. Like other industrial nations, the U.S. imports raw materials--and exports pollution.

The U.S. could be a leader in cleaning up the world's environment. We should be. But, to do it, we're going to have to change what we do at home and what we do abroad.

Let me tell you what we're doing in just a few areas to make the U.S. a part of the solution, not part of the problem.

First, **President Clinton** signed the **Biodiversity Treaty** that **George Bush** refused to sign in Rio. This treaty seeks to protect plants and animals from extinction. To name just one of the health benefits of this effort, more than half of the drugs we use to protect human health come from plants.

Second, we've stepped up our effort to **reduce ozone depletion.** Scientists believe that depleting the ozone layer could be one of the most significant threats to public health--causing more skin cancer, more cataracts, and significant suppression of the immune system.

On Earth Day, last April, **President Clinton** signed an Executive Order requiring the nation's number-one user of ozone-depleting chemicals to speed up the phase-out of those chemicals.

Who is the nation's number-one user of these chemicals? The federal government.

Under the 1990 Clean Air Act, industry across America is phasing out the chlorofluorocarbons that are thought to be causing the ozone hole over Antarctica and depletion over other parts of the globe. In fact, each year, American industry has done **better** than required by both the Clean Air Act and the international treaty governing ozone-depleting chemicals, the **Montreal Protocol.** On December 31, we will reach a major milestone when we completely stop the production of ozone-depleting Halons, which were once widely used to put out fires.

The third global protection initiative I want to mention is the climate change action plan that **President Clinton** recently issued. This act re-established the U.S. as the leading nation in efforts to protect against global warming. Cutting our nation's emission of greenhouse gases will have direct health benefits--not just in the country, but around the world, not just in the future, but starting today.

Scientists have predicted that, if we do nothing to stop the emission of greenhouse gases, we will see a four- to seven-fold increase in weather-related deaths. A warmer climate could also cause a big jump in diseases that are transmitted by insects--malaria, schistosomiasis, river blindness. In developing nations, an increase in these diseases would put an unbearable

**3 DAYS ONLY**

strain on public health facilities.

Some skeptics say we can't be sure that climate change is really occurring, and even if it is, we can't really predict what its effects will be. To them, I say that the history of public health shows that tremendous advances were made because people forged ahead, even when they didn't know the precise cause of disease and didn't have the exact cure.

But, let's assume global warming is just a myth. Even so, cutting down on greenhouse gas emissions will benefit public health by reducing air pollution. Sulfur oxides, nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, soot and smog--all of these are bad for human lungs. Based on recent studies, **70,000 deaths a year** are attributable to inhalable particles in the air. And air pollution is also associated with the substantial increase in emergency room visits by people with asthma, and by the rising rate of hospitalization for pneumonia and chronic lung disease. Cleaning up our air means saving lives.

I should also say that, even though EPA doesn't have any regulatory authority over secondhand tobacco smoke, we felt it was so critical to public health that, several months ago, I urged that all workplaces, all day care centers, all schools, and all homes should become smoke-free.

Let me also mention what EPA is doing to improve **food safety**. When I came to Washington, I learned that, of the **600 pesticides now in use**, fully two-thirds have not been subject to an up-to-date, science-based review. Pesticides are risky--to consumers, to workers, and to our environment. I'm particularly concerned about the risks for children. At EPA's request, the National Academy of Sciences studied the risks and recommended extra protection for children, based on what they eat and their special vulnerabilities.

Last month, EPA, along with the Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration, presented to Congress a comprehensive plan to impose a rigorous, health-based standard for all pesticides, covering all foods and all risks to human health. Currently, the law provides for a slightly stricter standard that applies only to cancer risks and only to processed foods. We must do better than that. We must cover all risks and all foods, because consumers should not accept unreasonable health risks for the benefit of small numbers of agricultural producers.

We also propose stronger legal mandates to enable EPA to get dangerous pesticides off the market as quickly as possible. **The burden of proof should rest with companies that their products can be used safely, not with the government to provide they are dangerous.**

And we propose to work with the Agriculture Department to help farmers use less risky methods of agriculture. Instead of applying countless numbers of chemicals to our food and then trying to study the effects of human health, **doesn't it make more sense to grow our food safely in the first place?**

The U.S. is a major exporter of pesticides. Right now, if the U.S. bans a pesticide, the law allows the manufacturer to turn around and export it to another country. We're proposing to prohibit the export of any pesticide that has been banned in the U.S. for health reasons. We also want to supply developing nations with the information they need to make wise choices about pesticides.

**NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement**, is another issue of public health concern. In March, I visited the U.S.-Mexico border. I saw raw sewage floating in the Rio Grande. I saw children splashing in polluted puddles, people washing clothes in contaminated water. I smelled the foul air. I talked to mothers about their concern over the possible link between pollution and birth defects. And I became convinced--first, that NAFTA was needed to solve the public health problems at the border, and second, that NAFTA could serve as an important vehicle for environmental protection throughout the continent.

With NAFTA, and the environmental side agreement that **President Clinton** insisted upon, our environment will improve. Without NAFTA, it will not.

NAFTA commits the three nations to carry out environmental planning on a scale never seen before. NAFTA has tough enforcement mechanisms. NAFTA gives the citizens of all three nations new ways to participate in cracking down on polluters. And NAFTA would open up a huge new market for environmental technology, and that means jobs. For all these reasons, most national environmental groups support NAFTA.

Finally, of great importance to this audience, is health care reform. Americans who live in the most polluted environments suffer from the injustice of bearing more than their fair share of the burden of industrial life. But, they also suffer from a health care system that neglects preventive care and makes it difficult for them to receive the most basic medical treatment at a cost they can afford.

But, our health care system isn't only a problem for people in the most impoverished communities. Most people don't realize that, over the next two years, one in four Americans will be without health coverage at some point. And health costs have nearly quadrupled since 1980. We need to reform our health care system so we can spend those dollars on protecting our environment and improving the overall health and wellbeing of all Americans.

A few months ago, I was in Mexico meeting with **President Salinas**. He spoke movingly about his passionate commitment to cleaning up the Mexican environment. Then, it was my turn to speak. I began to describe our own efforts here in the U.S. to protect our air, our water, and our land. He interrupted me. "Do you have a child?" he said. I said I did. "That's why you do what you do," he said. "You feel a moral imperative to fight to make the world liveable for your child and for the next generation." He was right. My son Zachary is five-and-a-half. He understands instinctively that, when we talk about environmental problems, we're talking about taking care of where we live. We're talking about protecting ourselves. In my son's words, "Don't hurt where you live."

At EPA, we take our responsibility for public health very seriously. We call on Congress, on industry, on environmentalists, on all people to change, to embrace a new commitment to environmental protection. Nothing less than the health of our families, the health of our economy, the health of our environment, and the health of our nation are at stake. Thank you.