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# High-Hurdling Through The Environment Expectations For The Next Four Years

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*Keynote Address by  
William K. Reilly, Administrator  
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency  
at the annual meeting  
of the  
National Wildlife Federation  
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I want to spend some time this afternoon talking about expectations—your expectations for what can be accomplished at EPA over the next four years, the President's expectations, and my own.

Washington is a place where perception often drives reality. That's especially true in an area as emotionally charged as the environmental. You don't have to be very well seasoned in the ways of this city to see that the best way to deal with conflicting opinions and emotions is to lower expectations. If you tell people you are going to jump the three-foot bar, they are happy and surprised when you soar four feet high. But if you tell folks you are going to clear the bar at seven feet, they are likely to be deeply disappointed, even if you miss by only a few inches. So the standard advice is set your sights low, especially as funds are few.

President George Bush is doing something different. He is setting out to reaffirm and reinvigorate the conservation tradition in American public life that began with Theodore Roosevelt. He is moving to take decisive steps to create, as he put it, "a new attitude on the environment" within the federal government.

Consider what the President has done in his first 50 days in office;

- He authorized Secretary of State James Baker to make global warming the subject of the first speech of his tenure.
- In meetings with the President of Brazil and the Prime Minister of Japan he personally expressed American concern over the financing and construction of the Trans-Amazon Highway, which threatens one of the world's most important ecosystems.
- In his budget message, he pledged "no net loss" of wetlands, a goal to which Jay Hair contributed through his participation in The Conservation Foundation's National Wetlands Policy Forum.
- The President pledged to propose Clean Air legislation this year, an initiative that promises finally to break a 10-year deadlock.
- Last week, the President stated his intention to seek legislation giving our government authority to ban exports of hazardous waste, except where the receiving country agrees to provide for safe handling of the waste.

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- Also, the President committed the United States to call for the complete phaseout of CFCs by the year 2000. We will work through the Montreal Protocol to ensure that the substitutes are safe.

With these early initiatives the President, himself, has set high expectations. I believe it is my mission to help him meet those expectations.

I also believe that high standards have been set by my predecessors. I think it's great that you are honoring Lee Thomas Saturday. He is a tough act to follow. Those who have followed EPA closely know very well what a great job Lee Thomas performed, under difficult circumstances. In enforcement, asbestos cleanup, indoor air pollution, and building public understanding of international environmental issues, and many other areas, Lee made outstanding contributions on which I will be proud to build.

So the second goal I have set for myself is to try to do as good a job as did Lee Thomas.

The third set of expectations are those of the people I work with, the 15,000 people of EPA. Not every Agency head considers his people the best and the brightest, but I truly believe that, in the entire federal government, EPA has the most dedicated and talented staff, working on the toughest, most thankless issues, in the worst building.

EPA staff want more innovative approaches to environmental problems. They recognize, in these days of tight budgets, the wisdom of the British scientist who said, "Gentlemen we have no money, and therefore we must think." Many of our EPA people are the children of the first Earth Day 19 years ago, and they want to see EPA reflect their highest personal values. So do I.

The final set of expectations, which are the highest of all, are those of the American people. The Bible says that "Without vision, the people perish." I believe that our people have a vision of living in harmony with the planet that sustains us.

They want us to set our standards high, to reach and to stretch, even if the results sometimes fall short. I share their expectations, and I am willing to take those risks.

We are not satisfied with the state of our environment. Despite huge investments over

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the past two decades, the environment today is under less control, the problems facing us more complex, the solutions more demanding than in the past. We must be resourceful and imaginative, even while our will is larger than our wallet. We dare not be satisfied. We can do better. We will do better.

We have in this society a large unfinished agenda of environmental business. These are the problems our laws were crafted to solve. But they have not been solved.

Consider wetlands. We knew 20 years ago that wetlands play a vital role in nurturing marine life and waterfowl, filtering pollutants, and buffering floodwaters. And yet, despite longstanding federal and state laws, we continue to lose these vital and productive resources. To this problem President Bush has said enough, no more, it's time to draw the line and set an ambitious new goal: "No net loss of wetlands."

A second long-standing concern is acid rain, a problem that has bedeviled the environment, damaged lakes and rivers, forests and buildings, fish and man. President Bush has made clear that "the time for study alone is over; now is the time for action." We will make public our legislative proposal for clean air this spring. It will be a comprehensive proposal, dealing also with air toxics, ozone non-attainment, and the smog problem that reached its worst in many cities during 1988's hot summer. I hope and believe that many members of Congress and the President's commitment to clean air will break the long, contentious, and exhausting stalemate and give us what we have not had in 12 years, a reauthorized Clean Air Act.

There are many other items of unfinished business. One is our debt to clean up after generations of careless, ill-informed dumping of hazardous wastes. That debt is past-due. We are in arrears. And it's a big debt.

Numerous critical reports from the Congress and elsewhere make clear that Superfund is a flawed program. My charge is to fix it. I have begun an internal management review to consider the criticisms and recommendations in

these reports. Bright, committed people have given their best to this program and still the results have disappointed us. The President made clear in his State of the Union address that he sees enforcement as central to the solution. He wants to see vigorous pursuit of those responsible for dumping hazardous wastes. We intend to use all the enforcement tools at our command.

You have all heard a great deal recently about EPA's regulation of pesticides. We must review our exhaustive and expensive testing and research processes. This society halts trading in a bad stock faster than it cancels a bad chemical. So we'll work to correct that, if necessary by recommending new legislation.

But let me enter a caution: we must as a society speak frankly about risk. The scientists at EPA and elsewhere have worked for many years to develop methods for assessing risks. They have also contributed to our understanding of such concepts as "acceptable risk" and "negligible risk." Our society will need to understand these concepts, for we cannot escape risks any more than we can run from life. We will need consensus if EPA is to have public understanding and support as it regulates and manages risks.

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Our challenge is to steer a course between scaring the country to death on the one hand, and boring it to death on the other. We are tempted to exaggerate and hyperbolize to get an issue on the agenda, and then to use esoteric and arcane language of the specialist once it becomes law. Superfund and pesticides have seen us err in both directions. I think sometimes I'll scream if I hear more jargon about RIFS' and ROD's. And how many people have any idea what 10 to the minus 6 means in assessing pesticide residues?

We need to communicate more clearly about risk and about choice, about consequence and about cost. The Bush Administration is serious about improving our environment. As we move forward, at a time when new money is hard to find, the premium will be on clear thinking and frank communication about difficult tradeoffs.

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I have spoken about our unfinished agenda. There is also a new agenda, one that wasn't understood back in the early 1970s when our major laws were enacted. This agenda derives from more recent discoveries: the pervasiveness of toxic substances and their tendency to move around among air, water and land; CFCs and the terrible destruction to stratospheric ozone they have caused, are causing, and will continue to cause even if we were to cease their manufacture and use tomorrow. When President Bush was presented with the most recent scientific evidence indicating the problem is much more serious than had been believed, he acted at once to commit the United States to full phase-out of these chemicals through the Montreal Protocol by the end of the century. For this to work, we must ensure safe substitutes are available.

And global warming. Five of the 10 warmest years on record occurred in this decade. Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has increased 25 percent in 100 years. Something significant may be occurring. We dare not ignore it. Tomorrow morning I will testify on EPA's just-completed report on the range of possible policy responses to global warming. (This effort is the first by any government to take a comprehensive look at how nations might respond to global warming.)

There is a fortunate and persuasive coincidence between the policies we would need to undertake to address global warming and policies desirable in and of themselves for our environmental and economic well being. These include phasing out CFCs, (which account for almost a fifth of all greenhouse gases); promoting energy efficiency (saving energy also reduces carbon dioxide emissions); and using our influence with the World Bank and other multilateral aid and lending institutions, as well as our own foreign assistance agencies to give a higher priority to reforestation and discouraging deforestation.

The weekend before last I headed the U.S. delegation to the London conference on saving the ozone layer. President Bush gave me a personal letter to Prime Minister Margaret

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Thatcher affirming his strong interest in the international environment. In our conversation, the Prime Minister spoke with great urgency about our environmental challenges, and then referred to people's environmental concerns as part of an increasingly universal aspiration toward quality in all areas.

Mrs. Thatcher is correct. Americans want quality in their jobs and their homes, in the things they buy and the recreation they pursue.

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They want a better life, and they define environmental quality as an essential part of that life. They (we) want economic improvement, of course. That's what pays for our environmental gains, among other things, but we want economic growth that doesn't shorten our lives or our breath.

Let us as a people claim the environmental high ground and give definition to quality and to economic progress. Let us clarify for the world that investments in the protection of natural systems like clean air and estuaries, ground water, and wetlands are every bit as essential and productive as investments in education, science, and defense.

To do this, to be a beacon to the world, we will have to do better ourselves. We in the United States produce twice the solid waste per capita that West Germany does, and three times that of Italy. We use twice as much energy per capita as Switzerland or West Germany and nearly three times that of Japan. We must seek international cooperation. We all use and pollute the earth's resources. Unilateral action by the U.S. will not be enough. The President places a very high priority on international cooperation.

We must learn not just to control pollution but to prevent it, not just to dispose of waste in better ways, but to eliminate it.

Here I must confess that more of the same—more controls, tighter standards, better enforcement—will not be enough to get us there. Regulations closing off waste disposal options will help. They have helped. Greatly increased costs of waste disposal are creating

the incentives. Did you know that a third of the landfills in the country will be obsolete in five years? Ten years ago the cost of solid waste disposal was \$5 to \$10 per ton. Now in some places it is \$125 per ton and rising.

When costs rise like this, so must our ingenuity and resourcefulness. We must learn to generate less waste in the first place, to use less disposable material, and to make products that are recyclable or reusable.

Speaking of resourcefulness, Governor Branstad of Iowa told me recently that he has proposed a law requiring that plastic bags and food containers be biodegradable. He told me of a poll indicating that 93 percent of Iowans support these measures. I learned later that the biodegradable bags are to be made of corn starch! That's Iowa ingenuity!

The agendas I've cited are in a sense a return to the roots of the environmental movement—the deep understanding that everything natural is connected—and that we are here as stewards. The environment will always be changed by human activity. I see nothing wrong with that. We are part of nature. We have a right to be here, and to earn our living from its bounty. But we do not have the right to harm the ability of nature to supply that living to our posterity.

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*We want economic growth that doesn't shorten our lives or our breath.*

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So I envision four priorities for the years ahead. First, we will make enforcement the vital core of our regulatory efforts, the means of ensuring that our laws are respected and liabilities are voluntarily settled.

Second, pollution prevention. This will increasingly become the measure against which all our policies and regulations are judged. We need strong incentives for pollution prevention, throughout our society.

Third, ecosystem protection. Wetlands, estuaries, and groundwater, the sea itself—these are natural systems on which life and commerce depend. They will receive a high priority, as we move to give expression to the President's promise to introduce "a new era of coastal awareness."



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Fourth, we will endeavor to reassert U.S. leadership in the international arena. We intend to enlarge and raise the status of EPA's international office, to revitalize important environmental treaties, to assist in developing administration policy on aid and lending institutions, and to help developing countries manage their environments. So much of what we must achieve cannot be achieved unless the world community cooperates. CFC phaseout is the most immediate example. Should other nations increase the manufacture and use of CFCs they could offset all the gains achieved from our phasing them out. We will be a part of the team that seeks to make the environment an important priority of U.S. foreign policy, as the President's and Secretary of State's recent actions make clear.

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Defending and improving the environment as we move toward a new century will increasingly affect the way we live. I think we will have to change our lifestyle, and develop, if I may coin a phrase, a kinder, gentler relationship with the environment. The role of the Environmental Protection Agency is to help manage that change.

What if we don't make this great change? We hear much talk about the fragility of Nature; it is true that human ignorance and greed can destroy large portions of the environment. But Nature is not fragile; Nature is very tough indeed, as you might expect from something that has been around for three billion years. No, it is human society that is fragile, as is the temporary aspect of Nature—the climate, for example—that sustains life. This aspect can change, as it has in the distant past, in ways that would make this earth vastly less comfortable for our sort of life. Nature bats last, as we used to say in the environmental movement.

Such a change may be happening now. We don't know for sure, but the prudent person, or the prudent society, takes out insurance in the face of uncertainty. The modifications that I foresee in our way of life are in a sense the

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premiums on that insurance. If the insurance turns out to be unnecessary, no one complains to their insurance company because they're still alive!

When *Time Magazine* declared "Earth the Planet of the Year in 1988" everyone was surprised: everyone but the comedian Jay Leno who said, "Well, of course, what would you expect, all the judges came from earth!"

So they did. So we do. Self-interested all in making the changes necessary to life.

The Japanese have a social technique for implementing change. It is a slow process whereby the stakeholders in a particular adjustment are brought into the process far in advance of its activation, listened to, and made feel that they are not being unduly harmed. They call this process "binding the roots." In this country our roots are wilder and thornier, far than they are in Japan, but I think some variant of this process can work. I certainly intend to try, and I hope I can rely on your support.