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CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES FOR AGRICULTURE*

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I hope the times are changing with regard to the role of an agency like EPA working with and supporting the Department of Agriculture, and all of agriculture, by helping to initiate an agricultural policy that includes the concept of sustainable development. I think there is a change. Frank Young described development of the President's food safety legislation in which the agencies could proceed in lockstep with our recommendations. It is historic legislation. And, it is a historic process by which that legislation was developed. It is not simply because USDA has "seen the light" on environment. It is as much the case that EPA has seen the forest with regard to the role of environmental protection and how a sustainable approach to environmental protection can actually promote a sound economy. It also reflects some recognition by the agricultural community of the importance of environmental issues and how we can integrate the environment productively and constructively into the way we live and do business. That is the forest that we at EPA are seeing.

I want to spend a few minutes on how EPA is approaching environmental protection generally and how we see our working with Secretary Yeutter and his visionary team in dealing with the realities that we all face over the next couple of decades. I am not going to talk about EPA's agenda for agriculture as EPA's agenda, because it really is an Administration agenda.

Bill Reilly and I both grew up in the Midwest. We were not in farming ourselves but we grew up around farms in Illinois and Indiana and Michigan. My wife's whole family still lives in Kansas and virtually all of my immediate family went to Purdue. I had the bad judgment not to keep up that string. But the point is that we individually, and I think the Agency as a whole, approach agricultural issues from the perspective that is very much in line with what Jack Parnell talked about at the beginning of this session. Agriculture not only is a great success story; but we also believe that from the standpoint of protecting the human environment, the importance of a safe and adequate food supply is central. We also believe that the American farmer is central to America's history, to our culture and to our economy. We think it is important that we support this continued central role for agriculture in whatever policies we develop jointly with the other agencies with regard to a safe and adequate food supply and a production process that is environmentally sustainable.

*Based on a transcript.

It is symbolic that this surge in agricultural productivity over the last 30 years has often been referred to as the "Green Revolution." Green is a term that is often used to describe environmentalists and I don't think it is ironic at all. I think that farmers are the first environmentalists. The concern that the farmer has is fundamental both to the relationship that the farmer has to the land and to the water resources of the country and the world, and also to the self-interest in maintaining productivity over time. We have to preserve and conserve land and water resources. This is fundamental to the farmer's character. So there is not an attitude issue at all. It is an information issue that we intend to work closely with you all to deal with.

Bill and I are close to this issue. We care deeply about it. We are not experts on farming and that is why we have on our personal staff Jim Mosley, whom some of you may know. He is a very successful producer from Lafayette, Indiana who advises us on the agricultural perspective in all of our issues.

Let me give a sense for our perspective on the environmental agenda coming up in the years ahead. The watchword that we're using and that the President has used is the concept of sustainable development. We think it represents a sea change in the way society approaches environmental protection. For the last 20 years the environmental protection movement has been a corrective, ameliorative movement. We have identified problems and then we have scrambled to clean them up or correct them after the fact. In the future, the organizing principle for environmental protection has to be pollution prevention or the concept of sustainable development. This means that if you integrate environmental concerns into the beginning of the planning and investment process, you not only have a more safe and sound environment, but you have a more productive and efficient economy.

There are some obvious examples in the production sector. I recently read a statistic from Japan that over the decade from the mid-70's to the mid-80's they measured what it took to produce a single constant unit of production. Over that time the raw material and the energy input into that single constant unit of production decreased by over 40 percent--the same production but 40 percent less energy and raw material use. American industry is doing the same thing. Many basic principles of sustainable development show that what is good for the environment is good for production.

Waste is the same kind of issue. Obviously, when we produce waste, we have to spend a lot of money trying to deal with it. Waste is also an indication of inefficiency. So in the manufacturing process we have seen the cost of an after-the-fact approach to pollution. We are going to be spending literally hundreds of billions of dollars simply to clean up past hazardous waste problems. In agriculture the same kinds of lessons are clear from the standpoint of the problems that result from erosion, the fact that the Ogallala aquifer, which 40 years ago had enough water to fill Lake Huron, is now being depleted to the point where it is causing very significant concern. And fears about chemical use has at times shaken public confidence in the food supply. I think we are all in concurrence here that the food supply in the United States is safe, but if there is a public confidence problem, that is obviously not good for business and the well-being of the agricultural community either.

I didn't come here to provide a litany of the issues such as non-point source run-off concerns, and wetlands or ground water contamination. Those are the issues on the agenda. We want to talk about the ways we are approaching them. In our management approach at EPA we have three fundamental tenets of our management plan. The first is to develop a strategic plan for EPA for the next 5 years. Over the last 20 years we too often have responded to crisis with regulations. We don't think that is the way to approach sustainable development. So we want to be sure the Agency is looking at the forest, that we are looking down the road, that we are prioritizing environmental risks, we are talking more openly with the public about it, and developing strategies that will reduce those risks in a sound and open way.

The second element relates to developing better information. We must spend more time and effort on research and developing data about environmental trends and conditions so that we are less subject to crisis. The crises come when some snippets of evidence emerge about a problem and we don't have enough research and information to be able to put it into context, and therefore we are often forced to assume the worst case. Better information developed jointly by all the agencies that do research is going to be critical to our taking a strategic approach to the environment. Also, it is necessary to disseminate that information so everybody has what they need to be able to develop the best strategies for protecting the environment.

And the third element is what we call building new structures of cooperation. Bill Reilly and I would be the first to admit that EPA, especially nowadays, can't protect the environment by ourselves, if we ever thought we could. EPA can only deal with a small part of the issue. We can provide some technical assistance, some research, some information, some regulatory guidance, but environmental protection is a society-wide enterprise. A big part of EPA's agenda will be to develop structures of cooperation among Federal agencies, with the States, and with the private sector so that we can be effective.

Strategic planning is in process now and in about 3 months we will be developing and sharing draft strategic plans that start to establish risk priorities. We will start to talk to the Congress and the public about those priorities, and certainly agricultural issues will be on that list. But the strategies that we develop to deal with those issues are going to be developed cooperatively. I think some recent examples, such as the food safety bill, are signs that that cooperation is already taking place.

I won't rehearse food safety legislation. We think it is extremely important, particularly because it emerged from this cooperative effort. It is designed to reassure the public, to make sure that we can maintain public confidence, and that there are no unnecessary crises. The public will know that we have the tools we need to deal with information that causes concern because after all, we all work for the public. We have to be sure they are informed and they have to know we have the tools to deal with problems so that when we say that the food supply is safe, they will believe us and rest easy. And when we say there is a problem there will be general agreement

that there is a problem to be dealt with. That's what we are addressing in the food safety bill.

A second key element of this cooperation that is going to be terribly important for the future of agriculture and the environment is the 1990 Farm Bill. I am sure there has been a lot of discussion about that and I wouldn't presume to try to add much more. Obviously things are still fluid. EPA has been working closely, under the leadership of Secretary Yeutter and his team, which has a very visionary kind of view, in incorporating a sustainable development approach to the Farm Bill.

Another very important element of what is evolving in the Farm Bill is, again, promotion of research and making sure that we have research that not only incorporates environmental issues into researching alternatives, such as LISA and alternative agriculture, evaluates the potential success of various alternatives, before farmers are asked to plunge into a new area or a new approach to agriculture. We must have information about what are the most promising avenues so that we don't have any kind of significant hiatus in productivity as we move into new approaches.

A third element of cooperation regards ground water strategy. This is an area that affects agricultural and environmental issues across the board. Every program at EPA involves ground water in some way or another. It is important for us to work with other agencies, particularly the agricultural community, to develop a ground water strategy that above all gives appropriate deference to State and local leadership in managing ground water resources but also makes sure that, again, the public is reassured and we are all reassured that this renewable resource is in a position to be protected and to be sustained over long periods of time. That kind of strategy is underway and we are working very closely with the Department of Agriculture in developing it.

As much as possible, we want to provide the information and the guidance but leave as much of the choice making to the industry and to individuals. That's why in our pollution prevention approach we want to develop information that shows that, for example, in agriculture low input should not at all mean low output. In fact, we need to do everything we can to make sure that low input approaches that are taken are maximum output and to promote market incentives. We want to hear from the agricultural community, and work closely with USDA, to determine what kinds of incentives make the most sense in terms of maintaining and improving the productivity of American agriculture.

So a key element of the future agenda that I will just close with here involves research, education and using the land-grant institutions around the country and the extension network to communicate and to develop better information in several key areas. One, of course, is food safety, to make sure that at all levels of Government and in academia, we have as much common ground with regard to the assessment of risk, and that we have as thorough a description of the risk assessment process as we possibly can so that we all do have credibility with the public and we avoid food scares. And when we

make regulatory decisions, we describe their significance to minimize any unnecessary food scares or hysteria. In technology, EPA intends to support the development of new technologies and approaches to agriculture in areas like innovative tillage practices, targeting the use of chemicals in a way that minimizes their unnecessary spread and dispersion, different formulations of chemicals that are used, and, of course, biotechnology, which we also believe is a very promising avenue for the future. Ground water is another important area for us to pursue. Finally, economics is an area in which across the board in the environment the importance of accounting properly for the cost of environmental controls and protection is going to be critical to making sustainable development work. So we very much support the networks of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, land-grant universities, and others, to develop information, to promote research that has scientific credibility and to get the word out to the public to inspire their confidence.

President Bush recently described in a speech the way he looks at the environment, and the way we all need to. He said, "through millions of individual decisions, through millions of simple everyday choices, we are all determining the fate of the planet." He has, as we do at EPA, an unfailing confidence in the spirit and the abilities of the American people and the people around the world, but particularly the American people and particularly the American farmer, to identify problems and deal with them.

We have it in our hands, as Jack Parnell says, to come up with the answers. The first order of business is for the Government to get its act together, for all the agencies that have a role in this, public and also non-profit agencies, to communicate and have their act together and be speaking as much in common as possible. We have started that. But we also need to involve everybody in the private sector. So I hope that this conference and our participation here is just the beginning of a process of mutual discussion. You'll get used to seeing EPA at conferences like this. We are pledged to listen to you and work closely with you.