

Remarks to the Birmingham Interfaith Alliance on Energy and the Environment
October 13, 2009

- What a pleasure it is to be here with you tonight!
- I want to thank Ray for that rather over the top introduction.
- And I want to thank Eleanor and Joyce for the invitation, and Beth Stewart with the Cahaba River Society for helping to make introductions during my remarks to the Birmingham Business Alliance.
- Beth sent me a copy of her notes from my remarks there, and I learned one thing: her notes were more precise than mine were!
- I am going to talk for about a half hour, then open this session up for questions and discussion. I'd like to be as informal as we can.
- I am especially delighted to be asked to speak to your Interfaith Alliance on Energy and Environment, for a whole variety of reasons.
- In Georgia, I'm very familiar with Georgia Interfaith Power and Light, which does great work over there.
- But I am tremendously impressed by the range and diversity of folks that you have here tonight. This is a great thing.
- Among all the sad things that divide us in this contentious age, a common concern for the integrity of the creation ought to be one of the things that brings us together.
- And I especially admire your willingness to invite an EPA regulator, of all people!
- I know that the relationship between EPA and Birmingham has had its moments, whether it involves nonattainment designations for air quality, or stormwater, or, yes, sewers, just to name a few.
- But we keep pushing forward.
- And while it may be small comfort, it may interest you to know that the consent agreement about sewers which we entered into here has become one of the models for similar agreements which we have entered into all across the Southeast, from Florida to Kentucky, and most certainly including Atlanta.
- And as painful as it is, we've had mayor after mayor come to us after it was all done, and thank us for enabling them to do the right thing.

- So your example has led the way for others. Again, this may be somewhat cold comfort, especially when you get your water and sewer bill, but there was an important message—that it's not right to pursue a false economy by displacing hidden real costs on the environment.
- Another reason I'm glad to be here is that EPA can do more to reach out to communities of faith.
- Now, I fully understand our caution. I am as strong a believer in the separation of church and state as anyone.
- And facilities owned and operated by communities of faith are subject to environmental regulations too. This can make for some awkward moments.
- But every faith has elements in it that speak to the importance of care for the creation, and to the importance of an ethic of environmental stewardship.
- In this as in so many other areas, communities of faith that embrace this stewardship ethic can be influential in achieving our common goals of clean air, clean water, safe lands, and healthy communities and ecosystems in ways that we cannot reach even with all of our regulatory power.
- Not that I'm running down EPA's regulatory power. In fact, I was tempted to spend this time talking about initiatives that EPA has been announcing just within the last couple of weeks.
- I've been with EPA almost 32 years, and I've never seen such a high level of policy activity as we've had in the last nine months.
- It seems that almost every day, EPA is above the fold in bold black headlines in major newspapers of national circulation, on completely different stories.
- For example, I could talk about:
 - Principles for reform of the Toxic Substances Control Act
 - The increased focus by EPA on the water quality impact of surface coal mining
 - EPA's Clean Air Act authorities as applied to greenhouse gases (note: Administration policy is clear that legislation is preferred)
 - Air quality monitoring in schools
 - Regulation of coal combustion residuals
 - The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, commonly referred to as the stimulus bill, and how about \$900 million of these funds have come to EPA in the Southeast for green jobs and environmental improvement (about \$72 million to Alabama)—this is in addition to about \$55 million in Department of Energy funds that have come to Alabama (ADECA).

- But that would take more time than we have, and yet still not quite get to the point of this evening's discussion.
 - So I thought I'd take a little different tack, and talk from my experience about eight behaviors that I believe will help in addressing the purpose of this workshop, which is to examine the energy challenges and opportunities ahead for Alabama from a faith based perspective.
1. **Invest in Information.** Real information, real data—not just information that supports your position, but information that helps accurately characterize the environment
 - Examples: current debate about mountaintop mining, greenhouse gas inventory.
 2. **Base your statements on science.**
 - Our guidance from the Administrator is to base our decisions on science and the law.
 - There are some caveats
 - Most science is probabilistic. Beware of absolute statements.
 - Stipulate what you don't know.
 - There are benefits to partial information; don't be afraid of it.
 - Recognize the cost of certainty. This works both ways.
 - For industry, if you insist on waiting on certainty before taking action, you can miss opportunities for early, cost-effective changes which prevent problems. It's cheaper to prevent pollution now than to clean it up later.
 - For environmental interests, the marginal costs of eliminating the last molecule of pollution can be very high. A standard of absolute safety under any circumstances may be unattainable.
 3. **Seek to understand others' views better than your own.** It's a lot easier to engage in dialogue if it starts from a position of mutual understanding and agreement on common facts. We can follow St. Francis here: Grant that we may not so much seek to be understood, as to understand.
 4. **Explore interests, not positions.**
 - You can have common interests with people with whom you otherwise might disagree.
 - To cite the obvious example, while I personally believe that the science debate on climate change is over, not everyone holds this opinion.
 - But I don't know many people who really think it's a good idea to jeopardize our national security by wastefully expanding energy consumption in ways that render us vulnerable to influence from others, especially, for example, by borrowing large sums of money from overseas

to purchase oil from areas of the world who do not share our values. Surely there is common ground to be found here.

- And there is room for common ground, especially in a manufacturing center like Birmingham, for promoting enterprises which will make America a leader in green energy, something which the world will need and which we should be making here.
5. **Create options for mutual gain wherever possible.** Here's one example. Some parts of the agricultural community have been concerned about the impact of efforts to address climate change on their costs of production. But there is great interest in potential on-farm use of biomass, which could both reduce production costs and help reduce carbon emissions.
- Opportunities also exist in the agriculture sector for growing biomass for energy, and using forestry as a source of potential carbon credits
 - Innovation in methods of governance can help as well as innovations in technology.
6. **Pursue conservation and energy efficiency first!** This needs to not be just lip service.
- I've heard it argued in Georgia that efficiency gains can be had at a third the cost per kilowatt of adding additional capacity. If this is so, why wouldn't you do this first?
 - True low-cost energy is not energy where the environmental costs are externalized.
 - I have seen presentations where speakers showed a projected curve of growing energy demand as if it was inevitable. We need to shape this curve. It is not dictated by the laws of physics.
 - This won't necessarily be easy. It may, for example, shape aspects of our community design, both in structures themselves, and in land use patterns that enable alternatives to single occupancy vehicles and promote walkable communities.
7. **Take confidence from past success.**
- Look back at the Clean Air Act
 - In 1970, catalytic converters didn't exist, flue gas desulfurization (scrubbers) didn't exist, selective catalytic reduction didn't exist.
 - Opponents claimed that the Clean Air Act would ruin the economy.
 - It was said that to meet the targets for pollution control in cars, you would have to put a *computer* in your car!
 - Well, we know how that turned out.
 - From 1980 to 2008, Gross Domestic Product went up by 126%, Vehicle Miles Traveled went up by 91%, Energy Consumption went up by 29%, and the U.S. population increased by 34%.
 - But in the face of all this, we **decreased** aggregate emissions of the six criteria air pollutants by **54%**!

8. **Promote an ethic of Stewardship.**

- Any of you who were Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts remember that one of the first rules of Scouting was to leave any place you went better than you found it.
 - You'll never find this rule written into any EPA regulation, but this one sentence is probably a better guide to right actions than six volumes of the Code of Federal Regulations.
 - And everyone here can do it. It is fundamentally an individual choice.
 - And you can do it at all levels: in your congregation, in your community, in the State, the nation, the world.
 - EPA has some good resources in this regard.
 - On EPA's web site, www.epa.gov, if you search on environmental stewardship you'll find a whole host of information there.
 - And as far as energy is concerned, if you go to www.energystar.gov, you'll find EPA's Guide for Congregations and all sorts of tools that can help you think about things you can do.
 - It's very broad ranging. Over the last couple of years, we've given awards to congregations ranging from the First Baptist Church of Dallas, to the San Francisco Zen Center, to the Swarthmore Presbyterian Church in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, to the religious order of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan.
 - If these folks can do it, so can you.
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- To wrap up, I want to commend you again for sponsoring this Forum.
 - It is forward looking, and it reflects that we are in a transformational period when it comes to energy.
 - EPA has all these detailed regulations and statutes, and they are important—they provide rigidity, and transparency.
 - But in this respect they are kind of like a skeleton.
 - You have to have one—but to get motion, to add muscles, sinews, tissue and blood, you need relationships. And that's what impresses me most about the group here tonight.
 - Not to get too poetic about this, but this may be an opportunity for those of us baby boomers, who have perhaps been more self-indulgent than our parents were, to redeem ourselves. To quote from last week's Psalm, at least in my faith tradition, Psalm 90, verse 12 asks, "Teach us to number our days, that we may incline our hearts to wisdom."
 - In past economic crises, we've heard the argument that environmental protections needed to be relaxed to permit the economy to grow.

- What we can see now, in contrast, is that a clean environment is part of the solution to our economic recovery.
- Green jobs, a restored environmental infrastructure, energy efficiency, technology development—all of these are part of making America a leader once again in helping us, and the world, meet our environmental challenges.
- And to quote once more, from John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address, “With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking God’s blessing and God’s help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.”
- Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here with you tonight.