



The Path to Washington
Convening leaders for an ecologically sustainable America
Report on a dialogue of government employees
The Carolina Inn, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
January 9, 2008

In 2005, a report for the IBM Center for the Business of Government warned that American governments at all levels “increasingly face problems that pay little attention to the boundaries created to manage them.” Prepared by the University of Pennsylvania, the report said that the next generation of government must focus more on problems than structures, more on results than processes, more on leveraging action than simple decisions and more on citizens willing to perform their civic duty than leaving it to government.

In 2008, a small group of state and federal employees entrusted with implementing America’s environmental laws, meeting in Chapel Hill, NC basically agreed with the thrust of the IBM-Penn report, although none had seen it.

The environmental professionals were at a public input session for The Path to Washington, a grass-roots information and education process that will produce a Report to The Nation in fall 2009 on legal and policy tools to help solve our country’s serious environmental problems, improve ecological conditions, sustain communities and enhance our quality of life. The process, begun in 2005 by the Multi-State Working Group on Environmental Performance, includes 36 dialogues, 12 white papers and 4 national workshops. See: www.mswg.org/Path_to_Washington/

This dialogue was called to give public employees who want to be innovative some information they can use with their superiors and peers on why innovation is an opportunity, not a threat, to their agencies and how innovation can be a “value added” opportunity for everyone. That includes taxpayers who want real problems solved even though those problems “lie outside of conventional regulatory and service jurisdictions,” according to the IBM-Penn report.

The attendees rose early in the morning to provide their input before formal sessions of the 2008 Symposium on Innovating for Sustainable Results, coordinated by the Council for Excellence in Government, Environmental Council of States and EPA. The input session was not a part of the official program. Although it was 7:15 am, folks wanted to open up. Even before the topic could be introduced, the employees got to the point: “We are not going the right way,” said one. “We are missing what we are supposed to be about,” said another.

The first employee explained that money is being spent, programs run and laws passed that miss solving the “real problems” that threaten communities and the environment.

The second employee used the example of bio-fuels where there seem to be major disconnects when it came to asking the right questions, collecting relevant data and putting risk-based choices on the table. That employee said he wasn’t arguing against bio-fuels because they have their place, but for integrated and rational decision-making that considered all of the risks and opportunities from raw material to use.

“A small group of thoughtful people could change the world, indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has” -- Margaret Mead

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A third employee chimed in that the federal government actually has a good interagency bio-fuel working group that's concerned about sustainability and it would be great if the states could get involved. But a state person said traditional top down federal approach can turn states off and strongly supported partnership approaches are needed on complex issues like bio-fuels.

There was much discussion about whether political leaders and public employees in general had the will to make the changes or will take the risks necessary to pursue ecological goals that were beyond the basic regulatory system. The consensus was that government and politics are risk adverse and if positive change is to happen it will have to come from the outside. "We have to communicate that being satisfied with the status quo is not leading," one said to the question of "what is the role of government agencies in promoting next generation environmental polices and ecological sustainability."

Other key points:

- Existing government agency mandates and policies cannot deal with new issues like climate and bio-fuels; in some cases, even basic information needed for policy choices and management is not available because the data being collected are about past priorities or serve a distant office rather than the needs of the local "place" as described in the Penn report's "center-edge" problem statement;
- Government employees are directed to maintain the status quo first and foremost; future needs or needs that are not part of the so-called core programs are secondary;
- Government employees who want to innovate are told "go ahead, but make no mistakes;" risk-takers are then penalized or shunned if they make a mistake;
- Government employees who want to partner and innovate to solve problems need a safe place within which to work; government agencies are not safe places for innovators; universities and academies of sciences are safer;
- The military services encourage innovation; government can learn from them;
- Government employees need a new law that supports experimentation or they will never move; without the law you have the same issues as plagued Project X-L in the EPA which was attacked with the phrase "if it is X-L it is illegal;"
- The new law could focus on "bold, bold, bold" problems that the basic system cannot address; the focus could be at the local or community level or global;
- Bold problems require big table incentives that can be used to leverage businesses and others to create ecological value. Certainty is one tool. Time is another tool, such as in length of permits. A third is fiscal incentives. A fourth is market incentives as envisioned in the PtW vision statement and is the subject of the 2008 business-focused workshop in New York City;
- A portfolio approach to environmental innovation can be an effective way to address big issues by spreading the risk of "failure" among a larger set of initiatives; the portfolio model is designed to promote overall progress while accepting an occasional setback; innovative approaches to achieving environmental results are not taken in isolation – where fear of failure might otherwise inhibit innovation – and sets up a framework that allows more to get done because decisions are balanced and connected; systematic evaluation of successes and "failures" is a critical element of the process improvement that makes a portfolio approach workable;
- Climate is a policy-transforming problem, globally and locally and will potentially affect government systems and their effectiveness.

* None of the state and federal employees represented the official position of her or his agency and all were there to share information or as observers and not as advocates for a particular law, policy or proposal. This report's scribe was Jeff Smoller.