

THE CITIZENS' VIEW OF POLLUTION

by Mrs. Donald Clusen
chairman, environmental quality program
League of Women Voters of the United States

TO ATTEMPT to speak for any segment of society on the matter of environmental pollution and its varied solutions is a dangerous game. To cast one's self in the role of spokesman for the general public -- or for the American consumer -- or for women -- is even more dangerous. We all play over-lapping roles in society. Any one of us may at various times be classed in any one or more of these categories.

The only reason I have the courage to try to set forth what seems to me to be some public attitudes about pollution is because my organization, the League of Women Voters of the United States, represents, to some degree, a cross-section of society today. We make it our business to try to determine what actions are in the public interest -- as we see it. So the view you are getting now -- like the others -- is a distillation of what my organization thinks, what I think, and what we think the public thinks. With that disclaimer behind me, let's take a look at the situation in which we find ourselves on this planet in this decade of the 70's.

Trying to decide what pollution is constitutes a problem as varied as trying to prescribe solutions. For instance, to the housewife, pollution is the problem she faces at the grocery store when she tries to decide what brand of detergent is the least harmful or whether it is safe to feed her family tuna fish. To the businessman, pollution is the difficult line he must walk between meeting standards for the discharge of effluents from his plant and providing his stockholders with a profit. To the young, pollution represents another instance in which we of the establishment have broken faith and another reason for turning to another way of life. To the League of Women Voters, it is a part of a program to which we have a long-time commitment--a commitment to support good

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management of resources, strict enforcement of laws, and provision of adequate funds for abatement.

There is no national consensus on environmental questions unless it is that a problem exists and the time to deal with it is running out.

The point of view of the League of Women Voters of the United States on water resources is that of a citizen -- an informed one. Because we are not manufacturers, we do not see water as a free system for waste disposal. Because we are not fishermen, wilderness buffs, or conservationists, we do not press for the restoration of all water to its natural state. Because we are not farmers or ranchers, we do not see water as a product to be used up or consumed at will. We are a middle-of-the-road group recognizing that people must earn a living and raise food and that municipal services must be paid for by taxpayers. Political reality tells us that elected governments can press only so hard for improvements when it will be an inconvenience and expense to constituents.

It is also our contention that we in the United States are not moving fast enough in pollution control. Despite an aroused public and considerable increase in expenditures, we are still not spending enough money to do the job. Nor is the present level of technical and scientific ability being used to the utmost. If it were, the public would not be constantly subjected to unpleasant surprises like oil spills, the mercury scare, smog alerts, and the like.

Too often only one plan for meeting pollution or management problem is presented to the public. Then citizens and officials have no real choice. Too often the plans are made by agencies with narrow viewpoints. Too often the projects are promoted by construction agencies. Both state and local governments continue to waste time and energy by opposing federal programs because of fear of a "federal takeover" and by poor enforcement of present regulations.

We are not facing up to problems which are almost upon us -- disposal of radiation wastes, thermal pollution, concentration of chemical wastes, reduction in commercial fish harvest, waste of ill-advised water projects, for example. We are not establishing ways of handling them before they overwhelm us.

But it is not enough to criticize. One must be prepared to suggest some things which can be done to improve water management. First and foremost, an aroused public must insist that more be done, and faster. This involves realization and acceptance of the fact that each and every American has a responsibility for paying for

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pollution abatement -- whether pollution is a problem where he lives or not. It involves public acceptance of the necessity for treating water more as a commodity and less as a free resource--even if this means a cut in profits or a lower crop yield. Desperately needed are public understanding of the importance of secondary and perhaps tertiary treatment for wastes, and public support for use of local and state funds for planning, training, and projects.

Equally important is the preparation of a number of alternatives, each with a price tag and a clear explanation, so that citizens know what their money will buy. The time has come when states and local communities, all of us, must assume our responsibilities and enforce the laws already on statute books. The machinery, the knowledge, and in many cases, the funds, already exist. Government at every level must stiffen its backbone, stop paying lip service to these things, and get on with the job.

It is the fervent hope of all citizens who care that industry, government, and private users together will approach water problems creatively, cooperatively, and conscientiously.

The amount and variety of state and local action for clean water by League members has been tremendous. Many state Leagues work to have their states assume a share of treatment facility construction costs. Some support authorization and appropriation of state funds. Where a state bond issue for aid to local governments for sewers and waste treatment required by new state water standards is proposed, Leagues apply their experience in citizen education and getting out the vote to pass the bond referendum. In some states League members are spokesmen at federal-state pollution control enforcement conferences. We watch to see if the timetable for cleanup is followed and we work for adequate salary and better training for treatment plant operators.

Leagues alert their communities to current proposals, legislative or physical, and to possible alternatives. They speak and work in support of varying types of good land and water use. Leagues in several river basins have agreed that their river should be preserved as a scenic river. In other places Leagues have asked the Corps of Engineers to hold public hearings before issuing dredging and dumping permits for spoils.

A livable, attractive environment requires control of water pollution and thoughtful selection of the ways water is to be used--for human consumption, industry, navigation, conservation of wildlife, recreation, irrigation. Each river basin has characteristics of its own and should be developed to meet the needs of that particular region -- as long as this development is not in conflict with national interest. Suitable development continues to require an organizational arrangement that is appropriate and acceptable, and a communication arrangement that encourages citizens to take part in policy decisions about the type of water resources development.

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Sometimes the best development of a river is no development at all.

New issues face citizens today in contrast to those issues of 1956 when the League began its work. These new and controversial issues include such questions as: the merit and cost of inter-basin transfer; the effect of nuclear power plants on water temperature; arrangements to dispose of harbor and channel dredgings; techniques to improve the useful life of a small lake; control of pollution from fertilizers, pesticides, feedlots, re-used irrigation water, acid mine drainage, and silt-laden run-off. Control of flood plain occupancy has new importance as does preservation of estuarine areas and wetlands.

Research is needed on the decision-making process of agencies and citizens and on the economic values of various alternative choices. A more rational system of payment for water is needed (perhaps user charges based on quality and quantity of sewage discharge). Since decisions on water management depend on citizen willingness to pay, planners need a clearer understanding of how the public will can be known. Federal aid could serve as an incentive to encourage localities to adopt a businesslike form of financing.

It seems to us that water resource development must be viewed as an integral part of the national effort to protect and improve the quality of man's environment. Through the years since 1956, study and action has taught League members how land use, economics, development, growth of cities, highways, and electrical power affect and are affected by water resources.

In these years we have seen the multiple use concept become generally accepted for water development projects. But during hearings on the setting of water quality standards, it became clear that multiple use must be accompanied by safeguards to assure that users requiring higher quality water are protected. Unless such safeguards are established and compliance with them assured, objections to multiple use of lakes, streams, and coastal waters can be expected to grow.

We have learned a great deal in the last 14 years -- not all of it about the substantive problems of water resources. We have learned how to use the hearing process, made some tentative beginnings in the use of the courts, and learned a great deal about the necessary role of public participation in the decision-making process. We have discovered that the citizen need not be a technical or scientific expert to express his wishes for the quality of his water.

A great deal of lip service nowadays is given to the desirability of involving more people in planning the use of resources,

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in determining what quality of water or air is necessary, and in choosing between various solutions to such problems. This is a considerable reversal from a decade or so ago when citizens had difficulty in forcing their way onto hearing lists or before governing bodies, and when those who did demonstrate this kind of concern were considered rather odd. Now the public is wooed by official agencies and conservationists alike. There is general acceptance of the right of the people to have a voice in the quality of water and air where they live.

Probably one of the best examples of this was the process of setting standards under the Water Quality Act of 1965. Across the country this exercise has contributed to a considerable degree to public knowledge and interest in water resource problems. A great many people know a lot more about their water; allies found each other and formed coalitions; people learned a lot about how to participate in public hearings.

But we have never cherished the illusion that the mere setting of standards would clean up any stretch of water one iota. Standards do not overcome the inadequate collection and treatment of sewage that is a major source of pollution. Standard setting does not change the industrial processes that produce the low quality waste water at the plant outfall. Standards do not keep the rains from washing sediment and fertilizer off the land, residues from the streets and parking lots, or solids from sewers out into the combined storm and sanitary sewer drainage to sweep untreated into the waterways.

Clean water isn't going to come about through anything as academic as standard setting. Pollution control begins at home. Standards are only a yardstick to measure progress.

One of the other by-products of the standard-setting process, in addition to the interest and knowledge it generated, was the expectation that things were really moving and something would be accomplished in cleaning up the nation's waterways. Five years later a certain sense of disillusionment has set in among the public sector. It is very difficult to point to measurable progress in clean up during this time.

Of course, most people understand that we did not get in the environmental mess we are in overnight and that it won't be cured overnight. Nevertheless, public expectation and hope has not been matched by performance. A sense of helplessness and frustration seems to be creeping over a good many people. People have begun to realize that the problems are a great deal more complicated than they seemed at first; that it will cost much more money than was anticipated just to stay even with the current situation; and that until environmental concern has a higher priority than it does

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right now in legislative bodies, in industry, among farmers, and in the economic base of this country, progress will be almost imperceptible.

It would be unrealistic to discuss what needs to be done, and who should do it, without at least touching on who pays for it. Certainly to reach the minimum standards set for waterways will require secondary, perhaps even tertiary, treatment of sanitary sewage along with changes in industrial plant processes and farming and livestock raising methods to lessen the volume of waste discharges. These improvements must be paid for. The cost of clean water will be paid by the public through taxes and through prices of consumer goods. Again and again the public hears this statement, "We have the technological ability to clean up the water, but whether we do so depends on political and economic decisions." What is really meant is, "Are people willing to spend the money?"

The Citizens Crusade for Clean Water (a coalition of some 40 organizations) demonstrated in 1969 and again in 1970 that people want their money spent for pollution abatement. We know that we are the ones who will foot the bill. We will pay the taxes. We will pay for industrial and agricultural pollution abatement by paying higher prices for products. People from all over the nation wrote, telegraphed, telephoned their Congressmen urging them to pledge support for full funding of federal authorization for treatment plant construction. The only reason citizens wanted this program was so that waterways would be cleaner and they wanted their money spent to for this purpose.

It may seem to you that much of what I have been saying is more relevant to the urban dweller than the rural. If this is the case, it has been deliberate -- for the problems we face are national in scope and over-lapping. Here in the Midwest the name of the specific concern may be fertilizer instead of phosphate, but the basic issue is the same.

The Upper Midwest is a great place to live. We, as yet, escape most of the mounting urban pressures of space and noise. Our environmental problems outside the urban areas are still manageable if we have the fore-sight to cope with emerging problems before they overwhelm us. To do this we will need to change some long cherished beliefs of this part of the country. I refer to such myths as -- "pollution is a problem of the cities"; "why should we pay to build sewers and plants in cities?" or "how I manage the land and water on my own property is my own business."

The mere fact that the sponsors of this meeting in Des Moines have recognized the need to focus on "agriculture and the national environment" is a most encouraging sign. I hope you will look on it as the beginning, or the continuing of recognition that we are

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all, regardless of where we live, a part of this national problem and that to find solutions, a considerable measure of sacrifice and commitment on the part of all of us will be necessary.

If it were necessary to say succinctly what it seems to me the general public thinks about pollution I would say that

- (1) people want to have a voice in the choices to be made,
- (2) they want to see some progress made -- less talk and more action, and
- (3) people want environmental concerns to have a higher priority -- in government, business, agriculture.

Surely these demands do not seem unreasonable.

Having failed to apply the ounce of prevention in past years, we're now faced with applying pounds of cure. There is really only one cure left -- spending massive amounts of money, strong enforcement of pollution abatement laws, and a total national commitment for action.

The right to produce is not the right to pollute. We must not inject new things into our surroundings until we have studied fully their possible impact. Industries using good quality water for their processing must return an equal amount of good quality water to rivers and lakes. Water, air, and land no longer are free for the taking and using as we please. Anti-pollution laws must be national in scope and polluters must be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

While we may differ on the methods, and even on the ranking of priorities which must be established to bring about a perceptible change in this nation's environment, I believe that men and women, government and the private sector, rural and urban dwellers, can work together in this common purpose -- and that, indeed, our very survival depends upon doing so.