

# SEJ Journal

The Quarterly Publication of the Society of Environmental Journalists

Vol. 14 No. 2

## Utterly boring

### Looking at the mundane agencies of your beat may startle

*Editor's Note: When's the last time you asked for payroll records of the regulatory agency in your state? Or the credit card records for the local pollution-control board? This piece by Tom Philp of The Sacramento Bee and a story inside on key government agency records should remind environmental journalists that it's key to check: How are they spending taxpayers' dollars?"*

By **TOM PHILP**

As an editorial writer following water issues at *The Sacramento Bee*, it's difficult to imagine an environment with more targets. A city with two major, flood-prone rivers. A city that's the state capital. A state that, depending on the weather, has too much or too little water. Water in rivers that face nearly constant conflict, from the Klamath to the Colorado. For the environmental journalist, this is triage. What possibly gets the priority?

Last year, I focused on this: The Sacramento Suburban Water District.

Huh?

That was my first reaction.

It is but one of 14 water districts to the north of one of the local rivers, the American. There are another 10 or so districts immediately south of the river. Yet more in surrounding counties. Throughout the state, there are more than 400 water districts and water departments of significant size. Their inner workings couldn't possibly be of interest. More interesting than, say, the fights over salmon. Or could they?

This was a journalistic journey that began with a morning donut with a favorite source. It led first to Sacramento Suburban, which turned out to be a government haven of income tax avoidance and padded expense accounting. It then led to surrounding districts, where golf at Pebble Beach and four-figure dinners at Disneyland were givens of governance. And then, finally, it led to other corners of the state.

*(Continued on page 17)*

### Inside Story:

## Great Lakes series shows big picture of everyday issue

By **MIKE DUNNE**

Veteran environmental reporter Tom Meersman of the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* had done a story here and a story there on the topic of invasive species moving into the Land of One

Meersman dug into the topic deeply enough to produce a three-part series called "Invaded Waters."

"Invisible above the surface of the Great Lakes, a dangerous game of 'ecological roulette' is being played with foreign species that is changing the ecosystem forever," the newspaper said in introducing the series.

Meersman said what intrigued him about the story was beginning to see invasive species as a form of "biological pollution."

The opening paragraph: "The Great Lakes have become a giant outdoor biology experiment – with no one in charge." Part One of the series set the stage for discussing the topic, with experts calling the world's largest freshwater lake chain "sick" and "an accidental zoo." It outlined some of the problems found throughout the system.

Part Two explained that most of the exotic species are arriving in ship "ballast water," water ships take on to help stabilize them. Usually, the ballast water comes from whatever bay or river the ship is in, and when discharged can release tiny organisms or even fish and other aquatic species, into a new environment. Meersman took the readers deep into the bottom of a ship as Coast Guard inspectors test ballast water.

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**Invasive silver carp in the Illinois River are heading north – and threatening the ecology of the Great Lakes.**

Thousand Lakes. But when he decided to step back and look at the really big picture, something journalistically special happened.

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# Slower or faster? SEJ board proposes bylaw changes

By DAN FAGIN

*“Have you ever noticed? Anyone going slower than you is an idiot, and anyone going faster than you is a maniac.”*

– George Carlin

Finding the right pace for change is a challenge for any group, especially one as healthy as SEJ. When things are going well, it’s tempting either to stand pat or to be so full of confidence that you charge up the next hill without checking to see if there’s a cliff on the other side. The SEJ board has been wrestling with this dilemma for the past year, as we pondered possible changes in the bylaws of our group.

The bylaws are not something to be trifled with. They are the constitution of our organization, the fundamental document that defines who we are. In SEJ’s first seven years, the bylaws were amended three times. Since then, we’ve made no changes at all. Now, in SEJ’s 14th year, the board has voted 9-2 to put another bylaws amendment proposal before the voting membership.

By now, all SEJ members – whether or not you are eligible to vote on the proposed amendments – should have received a mailing explaining what this proposal is all about. Some of that explanatory material is being reprinted elsewhere in this edition of *SEJournal*, and all of it is also posted at [www.sej.org](http://www.sej.org) (click on the elections icon at the top of the page.) Reading that material is much more important than reading this column, so if you only have time to read one or the other, please stop here and instead read the bylaws article on page 5 of this edition of *SEJournal*.

If you’re still reading, I’ll assume that you’ve read the background material and already know what the board is proposing, as well as the main arguments for and against. You already know that most of the bylaws language changes are pretty insignificant, but not all: Some of the changes would give associate and academic members more say in how SEJ is run. Associates and academics each would get one voting representative on the SEJ board and would also gain the right to vote on future proposals to amend the bylaws. In addition, future bylaws amendments would take effect only if they received a two-thirds vote on the board and also among voting members. Those are significant changes because right now, the associate and academic representatives to the SEJ board are non-voting positions, only active-category members are eligible to vote on bylaws amendment proposals (including this one), and a mere majority vote of the board and the voting members is needed to approve a bylaws amendment proposal (including this one).

What you probably don’t already know, even if you’ve read all of the supporting information on this proposal, is that the bylaws amendments the SEJ board is now asking you to consider are a product of what George Carlin might call one of those “idiot” vs. “maniac” processes in which we tried hard to figure out what “speed” was the right one for SEJ. The difficulty was in trying to reconcile two very important but somewhat inconsistent principles.

The first principle is the preservation of SEJ’s identity as a

group run by and for working journalists. It’s impossible to overstate how important this principle is to SEJ’s success. It’s the reason our members attend our conferences, and the reason their bosses let them. It’s the reason our programs are so useful to reporters around the world, and the reason our friends in the foundation world keep supporting our work. It’s the reason SEJ, unlike some of its peers, has not been gradually overrun by public-relations professionals and lobbyists.

But there’s another principle fundamental to any membership group such as SEJ: representative democracy. Many of us may have acquired a hard shell of cynicism about democracy, thanks to years of watching and covering politics. But I’d like to think most of us still believe that organizations retain their strength and vitality over the long run only if their leaders have to answer to all of their members.

In the early years of SEJ, our group’s founders believed that a virtually unknown group like SEJ needed to emphasize establishing and preserving its journalistic identity. Yet they also wanted SEJ to be as inclusive as possible, and not some sort of insular club. They made an unambiguous decision not to allow public relations people and lobbyists to be members, but they also recognized that there were many excellent journalists who didn’t engage in environmental advocacy themselves, but worked for organizations that did. And they also wanted teachers and students to be part of SEJ.

The founders’ solution was to create a system that ensured SEJ’s decision-makers would all be full-time journalists who don’t work for groups that do public relations or advocacy work on environmental issues. They called those journalists “active” members, and gave them the sole power to elect voting representatives to the SEJ board and to vote on bylaws amendments. To encompass everyone else they wanted to include in SEJ, the founders created two other membership categories: “academic” and “associate”. (There is also a very small fourth category, “honorary” members, designated by the SEJ board.)

The system succeeded in establishing a clear identity for SEJ as a journalism group, but it obviously wasn’t fully democratic. So in 1995, the SEJ board took a step toward more democracy by allowing associate and academic members to elect non-voting representatives to the board. That experiment has worked out very well. Votes are rarely important on the SEJ board, which tends to operate by consensus and persuasion. As a result, many of our non-voting associate and academic board representatives have proven to be very productive and influential members of the SEJ board. Still, it’s not an ideal system. Associate and academic members pay their dues and fully participate in SEJ programs but still don’t have a formal say in how our group is run.

There has been no outcry, no organized effort to push the SEJ board to make another change. In fact, many associate and academic members may not even realize they don’t have the same

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## Report from the Society’s President

By  
Dan  
Fagin



# SEJ Journal

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Winter '04 .....November 1, 2004

Spring '05 .....February 1, 2005

Summer '05 .....May 1, 2005

Fall '05 .....August 1, 2005

# Anatomy of the 9/11 risk-communication fiasco

By **FRANCESCA LYMAN**

Sept. 11, 2001, awakened Americans to the horrors of terrorism. The images of terror are still vivid, even a few years later. That day, too, the nation also witnessed a new kind of horror, although most people didn't realize it at the time: An environmental health emergency – as well as a communications fiasco in reporting it. With few exceptions, the major media failed to warn the public of the dangers in the smoke and dust following the building collapses. More importantly, the government's communications to the public deliberately downplayed environmental concerns, according to recent investigations, casting a harsh light on what can happen in a terrorist attack.

When the World Trade Center and a wedge of the Pentagon came crashing down on Sept. 11, the rubble left for rescuers and cleanup crews was laced with asbestos, heavy metals, diesel fuel, PCBs and dozens of other poisons. New York City was enveloped in a cloud of smoke, soot and toxic ash, and the fires at ground zero fumed for months, making it the longest commercial fire and one of the worst industrial work sites in history. Immediately the public clamored for advice. But how good was the environmental and health information in the wake of the disaster?

According to a watchdog investigation that grabbed headlines in the days leading up to the second anniversary of 9/11, the public didn't get enough information and what information it did get was misleading.

What's more, the findings of the inspector general of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency demonstrate that White House officials pressured the agency to downplay the dangers to the public in the first few days after the attack, some observers say.

In her investigation into official statements about air quality after the collapse of the World Trade Center, released Aug. 21, 2003, EPA Inspector General Nikki Tinsley says the agency "did not have sufficient data and analyses" to make a "blanket statement" when it announced seven days after the attack that the air around ground zero was safe to breathe.

The report cited other competing considerations, such as "reopening Wall Street" and "national security" as reasons for the

spin.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, "the public did not receive sufficient air quality information and wanted more information on health risks," the inspector general found.<sup>2</sup>

The agency's watchdog arm followed up with a second, separate report that received less attention than the first. In it, the inspector general conducted a survey of some 10,000 New York City residents regarding government communications, and found that most people surveyed "wanted more information regarding outdoor and indoor air quality, wanted this information in a timelier manner and did not believe the information they received."<sup>3</sup>

According to the survey, 81.8 percent of respondents (about 12 percent of those polled) were dissatisfied with information about outdoor air quality, and 84.8 percent were dissatisfied with information about indoor air quality. At the same time, the survey found sizable majorities of New Yorkers who "perceived" both short-term and long-term health risks from breathing air – indoor and out.

In the agency's defense, then acting EPA administrator Marianne Horinko said that EPA, along with other agencies, was only acting on "available data" and its best professional judgments at the time.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, there was nothing



Photo courtesy of SPACE IMAGING

**Did environmental reporters wait too long after Sept. 11, 2001 to get the story?**

improper in the White House influencing EPA press releases, concluded the Republican-controlled Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. After Senate Democrats on the committee threatened to block the Bush administration pick to head EPA during confirmation hearings unless an investigation was mounted, this committee stepped in with an "oversight report" concluding that the agency was at no fault in its response or communications.<sup>5</sup>

That, of course, didn't end the controversy. EPA's 9/11 report remained a lightning rod in fall 2003 and a debating point in the 2004 Presidential election campaign.

Several legislators continued to press the White House for answers. "If EPA's 'Lessons Learned' report documents deceit and neglect within the Agency, then the American people deserve to know about it," said Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), the congressman in whose district Ground Zero lies, in an Oct. 15 press release. Nadler, an early critic of the agency on this issue, and other legis-

*(Continued on page 23)*

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# New rights proposed for academic, associate board members

This year, the SEJ board has proposed amending the organization's bylaws for the first time since 1997. Active-category members whose dues are paid up are eligible to vote on the proposal, by mail ballot or at the annual membership meeting Oct. 22 in Pittsburgh. To explain the issues involved, the SEJ board prepared the following questions-and-answers document, with input from board members on both sides of the 9-2 vote. Additional material is available on the SEJ website at [www.sej.org](http://www.sej.org).

## What are the most important changes the SEJ board is proposing?

The most noticeable change would grant voting rights to the associate and academic representatives on the SEJ board. Those two positions are not mentioned in the current bylaws. Instead, the SEJ board created them in 1995 as non-voting positions because it wanted academic and associate members to have a voice in the governance of SEJ. Since then, SEJ's associate members have elected a representative every three years (like the rest of the board, they serve three-year terms), and SEJ's academic members have done the same. Both positions are up for election this year. The associate and academic representatives serve on committees, attend meetings and perform the same duties as other board members except they cannot vote and are not eligible for any of the five board offices: president, vice president for programs, vice president for membership, treasurer and secretary. If the proposed changes are approved, the associate and academic representatives would be able to vote but would still be ineligible for board office.

Another important change would give associate and academ-

ic members the right to participate in future votes on proposals to amend the bylaws. Currently, only active-category members may vote on proposed bylaws amendments, including this proposal. A third significant change would require a two-thirds vote on the board and among the voting members to amend the bylaws, instead of the simple majority of both bodies currently required.

Finally, the proposed bylaws amendments would make numerous non-substantive changes to correct typos and make the bylaws language consistent with board and staff practices. In a similar vein, the proposal would also incorporate into the bylaws the definitions of active, associate and academic members that the SEJ board's membership committee has been utilizing since 1998 in making eligibility decisions.

## Why does SEJ have membership categories?

When SEJ began in 1990, its founders believed the organization needed to establish an unambiguous identity as a group of, by and for independent journalists. They worried that employees of advocacy groups, corporations or government agencies might gain control of the group, so they adopted bylaws that banned members from lobbying or doing public relations work on environmental issues, and that granted voting rights only to members in the "active" category. Active members were defined as people who are "primarily" engaged in journalism and who do not work for groups that do lobbying or public-relations work on environmental issues. But SEJ's founders also believed that full-time educators and students should be a part of SEJ, so they created an "academic" category of membership. And they also wanted to

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# SEJ members vie for six seats on board of directors

The 14th annual meeting of the membership of the Society of Environmental Journalists will be held on Friday, Oct. 22, 2004, at 4:15 p.m. in Rangos Hall 1, University Center, Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pa. This meeting will be held in conjunction with SEJ's 2004 Annual Conference.

An important aspect of this meeting will be the completion of an election to fill six seats on the society's board of directors, each with a three-year term, and a vote by active members on a proposal for SEJ bylaws changes (see above). Board seats up for election are currently held by Perry Beeman, *The Des Moines Register*; Brenda Box, National Public Radio; Peter Thomson, freelance journalist; and Tim Wheeler, *The Baltimore Sun*.

Elections for associate and academic representatives to the board are held every three years and are in the 2004 voting cycle. The associate seat is now held by Rebecca Daugherty, Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. The academic seat is held by Mark Neuzil, University of St. Thomas. Neuzil will be stepping down after six years on the SEJ board.

Candidates for active seats on SEJ's board include incumbents Beeman, Thomson and Wheeler. Also running are Cheryl Hogue, *Chemical & Engineering News*, and Vince Patton, KGW-TV.

Running for the academic position are Len Ackland, University of Colorado; Bill Kovarik, Radford University in Virginia; and Robert A. Thomas, Loyola University in New Orleans.

Daugherty will run alone in the election for the associate seat.

Candidate statements and materials describing the proposed bylaws changes are available on SEJ's website. To view the proposed bylaws with changes highlighted and annotated and to review candidates' statements, please visit [www.sej.org](http://www.sej.org) and click on the elections icon at the top of the page. SEJ's election policies can be found in "About SEJ," located in the blue bar on the left.

During the annual meeting members will have the opportunity to ask questions, offer suggestions or voice complaints. SEJ officers and Executive Director Beth Parke will report on the status of programs, finances and membership, and may seek members' guidance on various issues.

A quorum of 10 percent of active members is needed to make the election official.

Questions regarding the board election may be directed to Paul MacClennan, elections committee chair, at (716) 837-2298 or Chris Rigel, elections committee coordinator, at [crigel@sej.org](mailto:crigel@sej.org) or (215) 884-8177.

### Important Election Dates:

- **Aug. 20:** Deadline for submitting candidate statements.
- **Aug. 23:** Must be a member in good standing in order to vote.
- **Sept. 13:** Ballots mailed.
- **Oct. 15:** Deadline for absentee ballots to be received.
- **Oct. 22:** Voting at annual meeting in Pittsburgh, Pa.



# SEJ spreads its message at gigantic UNITY conference

By MARIA BEDNARZ

The third UNITY: Journalists of Color convention boasted more than 8,000 registrants in Washington, D.C. this August, marking the world's largest gathering of journalists to date. The Society of Environmental Journalists, of course, was right at the heart of it.

The SEJ booth, across the aisle from Time Inc. and Reuters, attracted droves of registrants; SEJ attracted 47 new members and high attendance at the "Converging Rivers Ecotour" as well as an environmental journalism panel.

UNITY: Journalists of Color, Inc., is a national alliance made up of the Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA), the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ) and the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA).

"I was very proud to represent SEJ at UNITY events in Washington, D.C., both at our exhibit table and through activities of the Council of National Journalism Organizations there," said SEJ Executive Director Beth Parke. "The scale of this convention was stunning. Virtually every key player in the news industry and the field of journalism training was represented there."

"SEJ has been a part of all three UNITY programs to date, in 1994, 1999 and 2004. But I have to say the sheer magnitude of the Washington meeting brought every aspect of our involvement to a new level: from the full-day tour and well-attended panel cosponsored with our close partners at NABJ and NAJA, to an all-time high in new member recruitment," she added. "I'm grateful to UNITY organizers for giving SEJ such an exciting way to build visibility for and expand the community of environmental journalism today."

The full-day tour, "Converging Rivers: Intersection of Native and African-American Cultures and Environmental Effects on Waterways in the DC/Virginia Region," coordinated by SEJ in conjunction with NAJA and NABJ, took place Aug. 4. It gave conference registrants the opportunity to look at historic and present-day environmental and sociological issues involving Native Americans and African Americans in the D.C. area.

"I think it was even more successful than I had expected it to be because we had vibrant and articulate speakers who are tops in their fields; the best people to talk to," said tour leader Cris Carl, a reporter for the *Hampshire Gazette*, in Northampton, Mass. "Plus these were really good sites to visit. I felt the whole day wove together. It was very richly textured."

First stop was the Matthew Henson Earth Conservation Center, where David Smith with the Earth Conservation Corps, discussed cleanup efforts at the Anacostia River in Washington, D.C.

Next, participants went to the Reed Educational Center (Smithsonian Environmental Research Center) in Edgewater, Md. They walked the historic Java Trail, and Kimbra Cutlip talked about the land and its influences on Native Americans and African Americans. Participants also saw a small-scale tobacco farm.

Then the group traveled to Galesville, Md., where author Vince Leggett talked about the Black Watermen's Association, its impacts on the community, and history of African Americans and Native Americans during the times of slavery. Leggett gave copies of his book, "The Chesapeake Bay Through Ebony Eyes," to registrants.

Attendees went on to the Piscataway Museum in Waldorf, Md., and met Natalie Proctor, director of the museum, and her grand-

mother, Gladys Proctor, who is a clan mother and tribal historian. They discussed current and historic issues facing the tribe as well as its historic connections to African Americans. The Piscataway tribe is one of few still established in the Chesapeake area. The Proctors' presentation drew many questions from reporters.

On the way back to the convention center, *Washington Post* reporter Gary Lee talked about the mixing of peoples and cultures between African Americans and Native Americans. Mr. Lee, whose heritage is both Native American and African American, is presently working on a book focusing on this topic.

"The tour was excellent," said LaShinda Clark, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* photographer. "The highlight of the tour for me was the first stop at the Matthew Henson Earth Conservation Center, where I learned about the projects for inner city kids that help the center and the children."

"I loved going to see the site where they will be cleaning up the river," said Theresa Halsey, radio producer for KGNU Community Radio, Boulder. "Those of us that live out West don't expect to still be able to see an Indian reservation, even if it isn't state or federally recognized."

On Aug. 6, journalists had an opportunity to learn about covering the environment in the panel Environmental Journalism: Wading Through the Issues of Race, Class, Science, Politics and Social Justice. The panel, moderated by Roger Witherspoon, senior writer at *The Journal News*, showed attendees how the environment beat lends itself to reporting on communities of color.

"We were trying to tell people there's a justice angle to a great many environmental stories," explained panelist Joe Davis, SEJ *WatchDog* and *Tipsheet* editor. He said reporters were concerned about how to cover the environment if their publications did not have environment beats. "Environmental stories can be sold as business, outdoors, lifestyle or social justice stories. We were urging people not to worry so much about the label and tell the stories that are important in their own localities."

According to Davis, about 50 journalists attended the panel, which was cosponsored by SEJ and NAJA. "It was a very busy convention, and the very in-depth session we held was one of a whole bunch," he said. "It pulled an audience in spite of lots of competition, and we felt good about that."

The other panelists were Florangela Davila, race and immigration reporter for *The Seattle Times*; Jennifer 8 Lee, reporter for *The New York Times*; and Marley Shebala, senior news reporter and photographer for *The Navajo Times*, Window Rock, Ariz.

Deborah Gates, at *The Daily Times*, Salisbury, Md., said she walked away from the panel with a wealth of information. "We should seek out diversity in covering environmental stories," she said. "We need to deal with minorities, not only covering negative issues, but giving more public service."

She also learned two things that will draw the reader: "Put a person, a face on the story," she said, and break down technical information. "People don't understand the impact it has on them. Break it down and explain how it impacts them and put it in laymen's terms."

SEJ's work with UNITY 2004 was made possible in part by a grant from the Earth and Environmental Science Journalism Program of Columbia University and the Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory with underwriting from the National Science Foundation.



## Emmys, other awards and new postings for SEJ members

By ELIZABETH MCCARTHY

Oregon Public Broadcasting's **Christy George** won an Emmy for her documentary about reaping the bounty of the state's forests. Her hour-long TV program, "The Oregon Story, Harvesting the Wild," tracks modern day hunter-gatherers—former loggers, Southeast Asians, Central Americans and New Age entrepreneurs over four seasons.

"I knew about the cyclical boom in special forest products – but got especially intrigued when I first saw the 'mushroom camps' that spring up every fall where three National Forests converge in central Oregon," George said.

The documentary, which first aired last fall and was funded largely by the USDA, examines the business of gathering huckleberries, mushrooms, fiddleheads and medicinal plants, and the resulting environmental damage and turf battles. Each niche attracts pickers and harvesters from different nationalities and ethnicities, she said. "Native American tribes, however, generally have used all of nature's products," she added.

George has moved back and forth between the radio and TV media for 20 years. She acknowledged it was a mental leap to switch between the two. "Doing an hour-long TV show gives me the luxury of enough production time to really remember how the media differ – not sure I could pull it off if I were filing same days' news back and forth," she said.

The *Louisville Courier-Journal's* **Jim Bruggers**, former SEJ board president, also won a gold medal – his second – for his series on toxic air pollution in Louisville, Ky. The Renewable Natural Resources Foundation, a consortium of 16 professional scientific and educational organizations, awarded Bruggers its 2004 Excellence in Journalism Award for his four-part series, "Toxic Air, Lingering Health Menace."

Bruggers documented the health risks that hazardous air pollutants posed to those who lived in Louisville by using an independent analysis of air sampling data. The following articles focused on health risk assessments, asthma clusters, air degradation along with the economic impact of 11 local polluting chemical plants and lax enforcement of state and federal agencies.

Bruggers also won the National Press Foundation's 2003 Thomas L. Stokes award for the air pollution series that ran last year.

First place for the regional collection of the largest number of bottles and cans was awarded to **Bryan Condy**, son of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel's* **Jondi Gumz**. The US Environmental Protection Agency, Region 9, recognized Condy for keeping

more than 42,000 bottles and cans out of the dump. Gumz also merits recognition. She won the Print Media Award for her three-day series called "Writing Wrongs."

Other SEJers also made prize moves.

*Louisville Courier-Journal's* **Bill Allen** has joined the faculty at the University of Missouri at Columbia. Previously, he was a senior fellow with the Institutes for Journalism and Natural Resources and environmental writer for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

**Duff Wilson** took a new job as an investigative reporter with the *New York Times* beginning of June. He was assigned to sports investigations.

Previously, Wilson worked as an investigative reporter for the *Seattle Times*, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and

Associated Press. He has won numerous awards, and is the first two-time winner of Harvard University's Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting. He is also the author of the non fiction book, "Fateful Harvest: The True Story of a Small Town, A Global Industry, and a Toxic Secret," published in 2001 by Harper Collins.

**Megan Kamerick** headed west to take a job as senior reporter with the *New Mexico Business Weekly*. Her new beat includes development, tribal business and she hopes pressing water issues in the water-scarce region of Albuquerque. Previously she was an editor for the *New Orleans CityBusiness*.

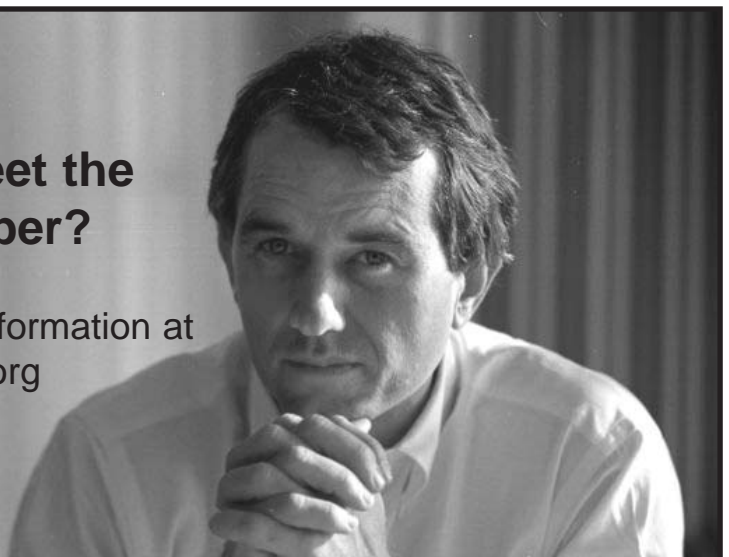
"Eye of the Whale," **Dick Russell's** book chronicling his adventure following the migration of the California gray whale from Baja to Siberia, comes out in paperback this October. The book, named Best Book of the Year by the *Los Angeles Times*, is published by Island Press/Shearwater Books.

Announce your awards, new books and/or career moves to your SEJ colleagues by contacting Elizabeth McCarthy, California Energy Circuit editor, at [e2mccarthy@cs.com](mailto:e2mccarthy@cs.com) or [editorial@californiaenergycircuit.net](mailto:editorial@californiaenergycircuit.net).

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# National reports better define GMO threats

By SALLY DENEEN

If you've been wondering whether to cover genetically engineered foods, try chewing on two recent reports by the National Academy of Sciences. The first concludes there is no foolproof way to prevent genetically engineered plants and animals from having unintended effects on public health and the environment. The second calls for more government regulation.

A decade after the short-lived Flavr Savr tomato became the first genetically engineered edible on the market, the National Academy concluded in January that salmon altered to grow ultra-fast could escape and outcompete wild salmon.

The National Academy's National Research Council also said plants engineered to withstand herbicides could become invasive species. Corn designed to contain pharmaceuticals or industrial chemicals could contaminate nearby corn destined for breakfast cereals.

In a second report in July, the Academy – congressionally chartered and long considered a more-or-less impartial arbiter of scientific questions – said federal agencies should beef up oversight.

"The products of this technology have the potential to be hazardous," the academy wrote, echoing activist critics.

Could genetically modified organisms (GMOs) be changing the nature of nature? Setting up future human health problems? And why aren't more reporters exploring the fascinating questions raised by the new technology?

It's an environmental issue with a strong consumer angle. For instance, in a 2003 poll, 58 percent of respondents said they'd never eaten genetically engineered foods.

Surprise! Every day, we all do – in the United States, that is. (Many nations ban genetically engineered crops.) Polls show Americans favor labeling the 60 percent of processed foods that contain GMOs. But Congress has not required labels and they're opposed by industry, largely

because polls also show many Americans would refuse to buy the foodstuffs.

Why are GMOs growing so fast, then? The new technology's promises certainly sound appealing: increase yields, reduce costs and provide pharmaceuticals or vitamins in commonly eaten foods.

Commercial applications for now are largely confined to four crops: soybeans, corn, canola and cotton. Most U.S. soy and cotton are genetically engineered, along with 45 percent of corn. Sixty-three percent of bio-engineered crops are grown in the United States.

Corn and soy turn up in processed foods as oils. Soy binds hot dogs. GE corn ends up in taco shells, chips and sodas. Most corn and soybeans are fed to animals, providing an indirect route to consumers.

Flax, canola, Hawaiian-grown papayas and some squashes are other U.S. crops authorized to be genetically engineered. Down the road could come wheat (highly debated), lettuce, strawberries, sweet potatoes and sugar.

And what of peanuts? Should we use this technology, despite questions regarding its safety, to produce an allergen-free peanut? Folks who've lost a relative to peanut-induced anaphylaxis will probably have a different answer from Greenpeace.

Then there is the new wave of experimental biotech products envisioned to produce pharmaceuticals or some other unrelated product. Corn is being altered to produce drugs for cystic fibrosis patients. Yeast can be made to produce rennet, an enzyme used in cheese-making previously taken from cow stomachs.

After a one-year hiatus, biotech companies recently have submitted 16 applications to the U.S. Department of Agriculture to grow plants that produce drugs or industrial compounds. Seven permits already have been

approved without providing the public information or seeking public comment, according to a June report by the Center for

*(Continued on page 30)*



## GMO resources:

- **National Academy of Sciences.** "Biological Confinement of Genetically Engineered Organisms." [www.nap.edu/books/0309090857/html](http://www.nap.edu/books/0309090857/html). Also "Safety of Genetically Engineered Foods: Approaches to Assessing Unintended Health Effects": [www.nap.edu/openbook/0309092094/html](http://www.nap.edu/openbook/0309092094/html)
- **Biotechnology Industry Organization** represents industry: [www.bio.org](http://www.bio.org)
- **Union of Concerned Scientists:** [www.ucsusa.org/food\\_and\\_environment/index.cfm](http://www.ucsusa.org/food_and_environment/index.cfm)
- **The Center for Science in the Public Interest's** "Holes in the Biotech Safety Net" and "Sowing Secrecy: The Biotech Industry, USDA, and America's Secret Pharm Belt": [www.cspinet.org/biotech](http://www.cspinet.org/biotech)
- **Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology:** <http://pewag-biotech.org>
- **The Campaign to Label Genetically Engineered Foods** offers monthly e-mail alerts containing key news articles: [www.thecampaign.org/news.php](http://www.thecampaign.org/news.php). Also see Organic Consumers Association, [www.organicconsumers.org](http://www.organicconsumers.org).
- **Cornell University** says it provides objective biotech information: [www.geo-pie.cornell.edu](http://www.geo-pie.cornell.edu)
- **Purdue University's** online "Biotech News on the Web" provides links to government agencies, news articles, reports and more: [www.agry.purdue.edu/ext/corn/cafe/biotech.html](http://www.agry.purdue.edu/ext/corn/cafe/biotech.html)
- **Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University** explores challenges facing farming: <http://www.leopold.ias-tate.edu/>
- **"The Ecological Risks of Engineered Crops"** by Jane Rissler and Margaret Mellon (1996, MIT Press; third printing 2000).

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# Teflon chemical:

## It's in your pots and pans, and it's probably in you.

By **CHERYL HOGUE**

We generally know where most pollutants come from. Sometimes it's a pipe from a sewage treatment plant, sometimes a factory smokestack, and other times it's runoff from farms. For synthetic chemicals, compounds like polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) that don't occur in nature, the initial source is a chemical manufacturing plant, though these sorts of materials often get dispersed through the environment during a lifetime of use.

One pollutant getting a lot of attention from EPA doesn't fit neatly into these contaminant categories. While this synthetic chemical is intentionally produced and commercially used, these industrial processes may account for only a limited amount of the widespread human exposure to the compound.

Instead, this substance may stem from the breakdown of related synthetic chemicals. Those stain-resistant khakis you're wearing may contain those chemicals or maybe the carpet in your newsroom is treated with them.

The pollutant in question has the long name of perfluorooctanoic acid, but is better known as PFOA or C8. It has been commercially manufactured for more than 50 years.

PFOA generally doesn't break down in the environment. It is highly persistent and easily dissolves in water.

Perhaps PFOA's biggest claim to fame is that it's used to make Teflon, DuPont's brand of nonstick coating for pots and pans. While DuPont's product may have the greatest name recognition, other companies' nonstick coatings are also manufactured with PFOA. The Environmental Working Group, a Washington nonprofit, has dubbed PFOA the "Teflon chemical" and the name seems to be sticking, at least in many news accounts. DuPont says the moniker is unfair.

Teflon and other nonstick coatings are actually a fancy sort of plastic called polytetrafluoroethylene, or PTFE. This plastic is also used to make fire-resistant cables for linking phones and computers when the wires are run through the space above the ceiling tiles. A thin white tape made of this plastic is often used to wrap around threads of plumbing to seal joints. And it is used to produce Gore-Tex and other waterproof, breathable membranes.

PFOA is not incorporated into this plastic; it simply helps along the chemical process (called polymerization) for making PTFE. Manufacturers sell PFOA to companies producing communications cable or waterproof membranes or to cookware makers who apply it to pots. DuPont-sponsored studies, which underwent independent review, found no PFOA in Teflon pans.

Nonetheless, researchers are finding that people around the world – and likely in your audience – have PFOA in their blood.

The blood levels of the chemical are very small, but it is unclear whether this amount might hurt us.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is concerned about PFOA because some studies show it can cause developmental effects in laboratory animals at low levels. Other research suggests it may be linked to some cancers. Industry denies that PFOA causes cancer or birth defects.

Some workers were exposed to this chemical, either in the manufacture of PFOA or of PTFE. And many residents near DuPont's Teflon factory at the Ohio-West Virginia border drank the stuff in their tap water, where it has been found in the parts per billion range. These people are involved in a class-action suit against DuPont claiming health problems related to PFOA in their water.

New research suggests the manufacture of this chemical – and its use in making the plastic for non-stick coatings and other products – doesn't account for the widespread human exposure to PFOA.

Investigators are turning their attention to other chemicals – those in stain-resistant treatments used on fabrics and carpets. DuPont's Stainmaster carpet is perhaps the best-known example. The Teflon brand of stain-repellent treatment used on pants and shirts – so coffee spills bead up and fall off – is another. However, the stuff used on clothes is not the same Teflon used on pans – Teflon is simply a brand name for a number of DuPont products. Other companies also manufacture similar stain-resistant products.

These textile and carpet treatments contain chemicals called telomers – cousins to the Teflon plastic, but not made using PFOA. Products containing telomers are also used to coat paper so grease won't easily soak through wrapping for burgers, fries or other foods. Firefighting foams used in places full of electronic gear, such as airplanes, also contain these telomers.

Some researchers suspect that most PFOA in our blood may come from the breakdown of telomers in the environment. EPA and independent university researchers are studying telomer products to see if or how fast they degrade and whether PFOA is formed. Results of the tests aren't expected for at least another year. Plus, EPA is negotiating with telomer manufacturing companies to conduct the same biodegradation studies and replicate the data.

EPA is expected to complete a PFOA risk assessment this year, which should shed more light on the chemical's potential to harm us, given the documented levels in people's blood. Stay tuned for

further scientific studies on PFOA from industry, academia and advocacy groups.

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*Cheryl Hogue reports for Chemical & Engineering News and still uses her nonstick skillet.*



### Teflon resources:

- **Environmental Working Group** (calling for DuPont to produce Teflon without PFOA): Lauren Sucher, 202-939-9141, [www.ewg.org/issues/PFCs/index.php](http://www.ewg.org/issues/PFCs/index.php)
- **DuPont**: Clifton Webb, (302) 774-4005
- **EPA headquarters** (ask for the press officer covering toxics): 202-564-4355, [www.epa.gov/opptintr/pfoa/index.htm](http://www.epa.gov/opptintr/pfoa/index.htm)
- **Society of the Plastics Industry**: [www.pfoa-facts.com](http://www.pfoa-facts.com)
- **3M** (manufactured PFOA and sold it to DuPont): 651-733-8805

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# Data show that Bush's EPA cut enforcement

By **JEFF CLAASEN, SCOTT STREATER and SETH BORENSTEIN**

The tips were specific. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency under President Bush had drastically cut back on oil refinery inspections and other enforcement, we were told.

Determining whether these allegations had any merit sent us on a three-month odyssey involving the use of immensely complex computer databases and thousands of pages of federal and state documents, as well as court records.

We tried getting the information from the EPA first. We formally requested records of court settlements, administrative fines, and numbers of inspections. The agency's regional office provided some records for settlements and fines, but was taking a long time to find and provide inspection records.

People in the regional EPA office in Dallas were pulling records from an agency database of court and administrative settlements, called ICIS (Integrated Compliance Information System). The preliminary data, though woefully inadequate, indicated that fines, penalties and court settlements, in regards to oil refineries, had decreased in recent years. That inspired us to try to get a copy of that database, as well as one that tracks Clean Air Act enforcement and another that tracks Clean Water Act enforcement.

EPA staffers in Washington were surprised by our request. The air enforcement database, called AFS (Air Facility Subsystem) and the water enforcement database, called PCS (Permit Compliance System) held terabytes of data – mostly from individual pollution output readings from the thousands of emission points in every factory, refinery and other facility.

To speed up our request, EPA enforcement officials referred us to the people who run their Web site searches, including the ECHO search that many environmental reporters have used. ECHO and other search forms pull data from the AFS, PCS and ICIS databases that we wanted to get copies of.

EPA webmasters steered us to a public-use data search system they pieced together in the 1990s, called IDEA (Integrated Data for Enforcement Analysis).

You can get to the material through a Web page, although the connection and the system are old and hard to use. We could not use the web page (<http://trex.rtpnc.epa.gov/>) in the office because our company firewall blocked it. All of the data retrieval had to happen at home.

IDEA is an old command-line system run by IBM "super-computers" at the EPA's computing center in North Carolina. EPA programmers created the IDEA operating language themselves, and all of it is unique to their system. Learning the lingo takes time, even though they can give you technical documents, including one that is more than 200 pages.

It took several weeks of trying different queries to create data sets that we could download, even though EPA programmers were extraordinarily helpful. It also took a while because we also stuck to night-time and weekend access times to be sure we were charged the lowest fees. The daytime fee is \$2,100 per CPU hour (hour of computer time), which we obviously wanted to avoid.

We were only interested in enforcement records, which let us skip past the huge number of pollution point-source files. Once we created the files, it still took as long as several hours to download them because of slow transfer rates from the EPA's FTP server.

In the end, we had all of the agency's air enforcement records:

- more than 2 million entries for 175,000 air-permit facilities;
- more than 1.3 million entries for 330,000 water-permit facilities;
- about 230,000 entries for 59,000 court and administrative settlement cases.

EPA programmers provided the codes we needed to count inspections, violation notices, formal enforcement actions and stack tests. The EPA tracks those activities, using the same codes, for their performance reviews.

We were interested in the most recent enforcement history, but the records we had went back to the 1970s. Our first queries traced the history of inspections and enforcement actions back several decades.

The findings were clear: The people who were worried about refinery enforcement under Bush were right.

From 2001 to 2003, inspections were down 52 percent for refineries, but just 4 percent for all industries, including refineries. Violation notices were down 68 percent for refineries, and 24 percent for all industries. The number of court and administrative settlements was down 77 percent for refineries and 7 percent for all industries.

The obvious question: Why?

Part of the answer lay in the EPA's use of formal legal settlements called consent decrees to address years of Clean Air Act violations. The companies agreed to add billions of dollars in pollution controls with the goal of reducing tons of ozone-producing pollutants and toxic chemicals each year. In exchange, the past violations are legally forgiven. Once the decrees were in place, refineries self-reported much of their pollution data, and the EPA cut back on the comprehensive inspections that had been the crux of enforcement, we learned.

In a startling admission, EPA administrators also told us they do not inspect refineries while they are negotiating the settlements.

That can potentially affect most refineries. The agency has already completed such settlements with oil companies responsible for 40 percent of the country's refining capacity, and officials say they are in negotiations with other refineries that account for another 40 percent.

The consent decrees, some as long as 170 pages, are available on the EPA's website ([www.epa.gov/compliance/civil/programs/caa/oil/index.html](http://www.epa.gov/compliance/civil/programs/caa/oil/index.html)). Each consent decree contains detailed lists of projects and, more important, deadlines for completion of each project.

EPA administrators could not provide any documentation that the deadlines were being met.

In addition, the EPA refused to provide progress reports sub-

*(Continued on page 25)*



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## Research News Roundup

# New journal explores E coverage in 2000 election and 1990s

By JAN KNIGHT

*The Environmental Communication Yearbook: A new journal for professionals, academics and “pracademics” who straddle both arenas*

The first volume of a new journal that may be of interest to environmental journalists has arrived.

The Environmental Communication Yearbook aims to provide a forum for academics, professionals and “pracademics” who straddle both, according to its editors, who describe it as a “portal into environmental communication’s many fields” that may clarify the “communication dynamics that influence the human relationship to the environment.”

The introduction contains a description of major events in environmental history and environmental communication history. “As long as it has existed, the mass media and popular culture have framed environmental issues,” the editors note. “The struggles over and the dynamics that define the social construction of the parameters of human relationships with the environment have far-reaching consequences.”

SEJ members are among the editors and editorial board members of the new journal and have contributed to the first volume. Here are summaries of a few of the studies to be found there.

*The third decade of environmental journalism: Generally good news, but challenges remain*

In 1991, Sharon M. Friedman of Lehigh University reviewed the first two decades of the environment beat for “Media and the Environment,” a book published by Island Press. In *The Environmental Communication Yearbook*, she assesses the third decade – the 1990s.

Friedman found that the 1990s represent a generally positive decade for environmental journalism, based on her review of recent studies and comments from 12 senior environmental journalists. Environmental journalists provided more intricate and less event-driven stories during the decade, and environmental coverage regularly earned national recognition, winning Pulitzers in 1990 – the first for environmental coverage since 1980 – and almost annually throughout the decade (exceptions are 1991, 1995, and 1999; for more information, see [www.pulitzer.org](http://www.pulitzer.org) – full text available after 1995 only).

However, centralization of media ownership, revenue losses and challenges from new media presented, in turn, challenges to environmental journalism, notably in regard to a shrinking news hole. This was in direct conflict with journalists’ need to tell longer, more in-depth stories about complex environmental issues, she noted.

American interest in environmental issues also posed challenges, Friedman found. It peaked during the early 1990s, after a severe drought in 1988 drew American attention to human impact on the environment. With the Clinton presidency, American interest ebbed, possibly because of less conflict about environmental issues. American interest peaked again in 2000, with the George W. Bush presidency. “The environmental beat has never really been stable,” Friedman explained; it rides a “cycle of ups and downs like an elevator.”

Repercussions of this can be seen in television news time dedicated to environmental stories. One survey, Friedman noted, showed that television news dedicated 774 minutes to environmental coverage in 1989 and, just five years later, a decade low of 122 minutes in 1994. Between 1996 and 2000, TV coverage ranged from 174 minutes in 1996 to 280 minutes in 2000.

Still, strides were made, she found. Environment reporters began using a wider variety of sources, completing more major enterprise and investigative pieces and using more graphics to help explain complex issues. Further, editors continued to support environmental coverage, despite budget constraints. And coverage improved in sophistication and range. Rather than focusing primarily on pollution events, environment reporters began covering issues ranging from land management and sustainability to endocrine disrupters and farming practices. Readers and editors were demanding a clearer presentation of risk and compelling stories about it, possibly because the public had become “numbed by pollution scares” and sought better understanding, she wrote.

To that end, Friedman found, surveys and her interviews pointed to a need for today’s environment reporters to focus on root causes of environmental degradation, including consumption patterns, demographic trends and land-use patterns.

And although environment reporting has improved in its complexity, “coping with complexity was a major challenge for the [1990s], and continues to be so today,” she wrote. “As the issues became wider, the background knowledge required – already especially large for environmental reporters – expanded even more.”

For more information, see Sharon M. Friedman, “And the Beat Goes On: The Third Decade of Environmental Journalism.” In *Environmental Communication Yearbook*, Volume 1 (Susan L. Senecah, editor), pp. 175 -188. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004.

National Enquirer *shuns status-quo sources in environmental risk stories*, NY Times, USA Today *go to government, industry sources; all use ‘ordinary’ people for drama, study shows*

Two nationally circulating newspapers with different target audiences frame environmental risk along status-quo lines, while a third – *The National Enquirer* – relies more on the public and less on government and industry sources to frame the issues, according to a study by Donnalyn Pompper of Florida State University.

(Continued next page)

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## E coverage... (from page 11)

The findings support previous research showing that journalists tend to rely on government and industry sources for technical and policy information while relying on laypeople for drama, Pompper wrote. The findings also confirm that the mainstream media tend to marginalize people of lower social and economic classes in reporting on environmental risk while a tabloid may offer a more public arena, she suggested.

Pompper analyzed more than 6,000 environmental news articles appearing in *The New York Times*, *USA Today* and the *National Enquirer* between 1983 and 1997, aiming to discover how these newspapers defined environmental risk via their sources. Each paper represented a different target audience: *The Times* aims for upper-class readers, *USA Today* for middle-class readers and the *Enquirer* for readers of lower social and economic status.

She found that "authoritative" sources, such as representatives of government and industry, made up more than half of the sources used by the *Times* (three-fourths of all sources) and *USA Today* (two-thirds of all sources), while laypeople and members of interest groups made up more than half of all sources used by *Enquirer* reporters during the time period studied. She noted that the *Enquirer*, a supermarket tabloid, might have used fewer "elite" sources because of such sources' unwillingness to talk with tabloid reporters, although two-thirds of the *Enquirer's* sources came from government, industry and similar authorities.

She also found, however, that all three newspapers went to ordinary citizens for information that provided their stories with drama. "For example," she wrote, "even though public sources were unlikely risk framers in *New York Times* stories, their health concerns were included when details were dramatic. Furthermore, the *National Enquirer* promoted public sources as heroes who live with risk, energized by their personal strength, faith in God, and the belief that Americans can do anything."

The strongest theme for all coverage focused on toxic waste and pollution. "Stories routinely detailed environmental disorder caused by chemical spills and decomposing garbage, as primarily told by government and industry spokespeople who assured readers that they had the situation under control," while lay public and interest group sources gained less attention, she wrote. *The Enquirer*, however, "did not share the mainstream media's apprehension in upsetting order," she wrote. It "criticized bureaucrats as ineffective and offered readers self-help tips for fighting pollution. In doing so, this tabloid newspaper affirmed its readers' lack of faith and trust in the establishment and encouraged them to consult their own devices."

"Whether they realize it or not," Pompper concluded, "the mainstream news media rarely report a balance of perspectives on environmental risk. . . . such limitations on the marketplace of

ideas may severely handicap the environmental risk policy-making process."

For more information, see Donnalyn Pompper, "At 20th Century's Close: Framing the Public Policy Issue of Environmental Risk." In *Environmental Communication Yearbook*, Volume 1 (Susan L. Senecah, editor), pp. 99 – 134. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004.

*Election 2000: Environment presented as horse-race issue, lacked in-depth coverage, study shows*

News media coverage of environmental issues during the 2000 presidential election was minimal and superficial, according to researchers from the University of North Dakota and Mountain View Hospital, adding to a body of research suggesting that the media's attention was diverted from real issues during the campaign.

In a systematic study of 19 major metropolitan U.S. newspapers and *The Associated Press* between 1998 and 2000, the researchers analyzed 110 articles for coverage themes, attribution of blame and responsibility for solving environmental problems, tone, sources, political frames, and type of environmental issue. Political frames referred to whether a story was "image-based" (for example, focusing on how an environmental issue could help a candidate win or lose the race) or "issue-based" (for example, focusing on candidate stance or on the importance voters placed on the issue).

They found that environmental coverage during the campaign consisted primarily of episodic and image-based frames. Episodic framing "presents public issues as single, concrete events ... and instances occurring more or less in isolation. It only provides snapshots of an issue, with any explanations based upon sensational and emotional appeal," according to the researchers, who noted that the result of this type of coverage may be most evident in the case of Al Gore.

"Gore's record on his greatest selling points of procedural and environmental issues was hardly articulated" and, when it was, it was neutralized by focusing "more on campaign strategy and images, rather than a discussion of issues and their impact," the researchers stated.

"The media are one of, if not the, primary sources of information about environmental issues," the authors continued. When the media focus less on background analysis and more on sensational, image-based, anecdotal accounts, they concluded, the long-term effect is a "trivialization of public discourse and the erosion" of electoral accountability.

For more information, see Michael Nitz and Holly West, "Framing of Newspaper News Stories During a Presidential Campaign Cycle: The Case of Bush-Gore in Election 2000." In *Environmental Communication Yearbook*, Volume 1 (Susan L. Senecah, editor), pp. 205 - 226. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004.

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# Bush's 'Healthy Forests' lacks solid science grounding

By PAUL D. THACKER

With the presidential election coming up, now is as good a time as any to take a look at Bush's environmental record.

A host of different organizations pass out environmental score cards on politicians, but to gain an honest assessment of the president it is probably more fair to examine policy he has made a cornerstone of his environmental legacy – healthy forests. In fact, Bush has made healthy forests such an integral part of his position on the environment that he has never spared a moment to tout it during State of the Union addresses or stump speeches in the hinterlands.

To begin, it's important to understand what the Bush policy does. Second, look at the science backing up the legislation. Starting with the science provides a firm foundation for your reporting once you venture into the political winds that storm around any piece of environmental legislation.

Bush's healthy forests is meant to deal with the wildfires raging every summer across the western United States. It's no small problem: Because of past fire suppression policies (remember growing up with Smokey Bear?), the Forest Service (USFS) has allowed the national forests to become overgrown. Add to that the West's worst drought in 500 years, and it's easy to understand why millions of acres go up in smoke every fire season. To deal with this, the Healthy Forest Initiative was an executive order that streamlined public input for thinning projects on the national forests. In the eyes of the Forest Service, streamlining was needed because lawsuits by environmentalists kept getting in the way of thinning projects meant to save forests.

Second, the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) was signed last year by Bush to put more money into these thinning projects. When the president signed the act, he remarked, "[W]e will help to prevent catastrophic wildfires, we'll help save lives and property, and we'll help protect our forests from sudden and needless destruction."

When you take a look at the science behind these policies, however, you will find serious problems with Bush's healthy forests efforts. First, everyone except the most walle-eyed environmentalist agrees that something must be done. The National Forests contain more trees per acre than at any other time in American history. But is there really a need to streamline thinning projects because lawsuits by environmentalists are impeding Forest Service work?

In 2003, a report by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) found that only 3 percent of USFS thinning projects actually were litigated by environmental groups. Further, the report also discovered that the USFS did not even have a database of these lawsuits to back up its claim that litigation was impeding thinning projects.

Interestingly, when I spoke with one high-ranking Forest Service official who has been acknowledged by the agency as an expert on forest fires, this person told me that the GAO report fit quite well with his own personal experience. "I never felt that environmentalists were ever the problem," he told me. Unfortunately, he had to say this off the record, because the Forest Service's policy is that environmentalists interfere with thinning projects. As if to counteract the GAO study, the Forest

Service came out with its own report just a few months afterwards. The results showed just the opposite of the GAO study.

"The Forest Service is a case study in spin," one author of the GAO report told me.

A recent study by Hanna Cortner, associate director of the Ecological Restoration Institute at Northern Arizona University, found that a broad spectrum of groups appealed USFS projects, including individuals, tribes, business interests, and environmental groups [J. For. 2004, 102 (2)]. She questions the USFS's



Photo courtesy of James Johnston/Cascadia Wildlands Project

**The Biscuit fire in southern Oregon was the nation's largest in 2002. Proposed salvage logging is subject of intense debate.**

charges of excessive litigation by environmental groups, because she also found that the agency lacks a national database of appeals and litigation. Other scientists have found similar results to Cortner's study.

So what about the thinning projects themselves? Will they work? It's really unknown, but the best guess is maybe. If we're lucky. Here's the most interesting thing: While the HFRA is touted by the president as a means to save lives and property, very little science exists on how to thin forests to manage fire. I know it sounds crazy, but the largest initiative by the U.S. Forest Service in our lifetime is based on little to no science.

"The Forest Service doesn't have a clue about how to thin the forest to control fire," former USFS chief Jack Ward Thomas told me. "We've done thinning for silviculture enhancement and pest

*(Continued on page 22)*

# Great Lakes... (from page 1)

Part Three looked at what is being done – or not done – to control the problem.

Their Web version of the series also included a gallery of great

Specifically in Minnesota, at stake is the long-term ecological balance in more than 15,000 lakes, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area wilderness, the headwaters of the Mississippi River, and dozens of tributaries.

**Q: How did you get started? I assume you had written some stories in the past on invasive species?**

**A:** I spent about three weeks reviewing previous articles from other papers, identifying and interviewing key scientists and policymakers, and writing a proposal that listed some of the questions and topics that I thought a project should address.

**Q: You include a number of invasive species in the system – 179 by latest count. Where did you get that information?**

**A:** Using various sources, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Center for Research on Aquatic Invasive Species had compiled a list of 162 non-indigenous species of aquatic plants and animals that had arrived

in the Great Lakes since the 1800s. *The Star Tribune* decided to update that list. David Shaffer, editor of the project, worked with a newspaper librarian to find a total of 40 additional possible invaders that had been identified in recent research papers. He built a database, consulted with leading scientists, and eventually added 17 of the species to NOAA’s list. The programs Access and Excel were used to generate data for charts showing exotics discovered by decade and other breakouts.

**Q: What sources did you use?**

**A:** For the list of species: NOAA, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sea Grant, numerous scientific journals. For the project: More than 125 people from a wide variety of perspectives; GAO reports and their Canadian equivalents; U.S. Coast Guard data; proceedings from several conferences and attendance at one of them; existing laws and proposed legislation; numerous rules and regulations as published in the Federal Register; Congressional testimony.

**Q: As you gather information, what do you do with it? How do you manage information as you collect it?**

**A:** In general, notes from interviews were saved in computer files that were alphabetized. Most research papers, reports and other documents were printed and organized in paper files. I kept a master list of sources with the usual contact info but also the date(s) of each interview. I printed out all e-mail correspondence

*(Continued next page)*



Star Tribune/Minneapolis-St. Paul 2004

**The New York Department of Environmental Conservation collects dead loons from the shores of Lake Erie to test for botulism. Some scientists believe that the introduction of zebra and quagga mussels has caused the deaths of thousands of birds and fish. The state stopped gathering the dead birds because of funding cuts.**

photographs showing the beauty of the Great Lakes. While many of the gallery’s pictures didn’t run with the initial newspaper story, some were included in a reprint and added to the Web presentation.

The series is the kind of journalism that can be duplicated in just about any place with a port, although invasive species is a problem that can be found just about everywhere. That’s why it makes a great “Inside Story” for *SEJournal*, which interviewed Meersman about how he produced and wrote the story.

**Q: How did you conceive of the project – what was it that made you decide to not just do a story but something more in-depth?**

**A:** We had written a number of shorter stories about exotics spreading into Minnesota lakes and rivers. The more I talked with scientists, the more I realized that exotics are more than just nuisances: they are biological pollution that causes permanent and often unpredictable consequences. It seemed time to look more broadly at the issue, including the sources of the problem and whether anything was being done to alleviate it.

**Q: Minneapolis is not on one of the Great Lakes. Why is this an important story for your newspaper?**

**A:** Invasive species become established in a single ecosystem like the Great Lakes, but they don’t stop there. They are spreading to interior lakes and river systems in some of the richest lake country in North America, including Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and Ontario.

and kept it in a single file arranged chronologically. For backup, most interviews were taped and key ones were transcribed. I first did “brain dump” interviews where I learned as much as I could about all dimensions of the issue.

Later I did more focused interviews after I had a better idea of specific themes and stories.

After the project was approved, I attended a conference in Michigan to meet several key researchers and get a better overview of the problem. I also went to a Minnesota Sea Grant office and spent most of a day in its library, borrowing or copying a boxful of materials.

And I did lengthy interviews with several people to learn what was out there regarding topics, such as: costs, legislation, emerging science, historical background, sources of the problem, referrals to various interest groups, field work being done, etc.

It didn't take long to refine the list of key topics that we needed to address and to provide a more detailed “scope” for the project: it would include only aquatic species, for instance, not forest or agricultural invaders. And it would focus on the Great Lakes but would also need to include the Mississippi River basin, since foreign invaders were increasingly moving between the two systems.

I worked with graphic artists for months, informing them of the stories that were emerging, and I kept my editor and managers informed about reporting that had been done and what was still needed.

Three months into the project, I had written rough budgets for about a dozen stories. I was restless and wanted to write, but I also knew there was more to learn and perhaps better stories or examples to identify. It required perseverance to keep chasing down leads, and confidence that I could somehow manage all the mounting information.

Some of our best material came from the last few weeks of reporting, so I'm glad we pushed hard and that editors remained patient and trusted my judgment.

**Q: How did you arrange to accompany inspectors as they looked at ballast water? How about the owners of the ship?**

**A:** We requested it through the U.S. Coast Guard, but got the final approval from the Seaway Authority. Their officials found us a ship whose owner was willing to cooperate, so we didn't deal directly with the owner. We actually had to go through the process twice. Although we requested to view and

photograph a ballast water inspection, the first ship we were allowed to board could only show us a mock inspection because it entered the St. Lawrence Seaway with a full cargo and no ballast water.

We had to make a second request and arrange a separate trip



Star Tribune/Minneapolis-St. Paul 2004

**Fishermen haul in invasive black Asian bighead carp from the Illinois River near Peoria. Considered a nuisance by sport fishermen, these fish are bound for markets in New York City.**

to witness and report a real ballast water inspection.

**Q: The Web version of your series has some wonderful pictures, some of which correspond with the stories but some just pretty shots of the Great Lakes. Talk about how you involved the photographer or photographers. Do you both work on photo ideas or does the photographer(s) work pretty much on their own? How important are pictures to telling this story?**

**A:** Pictures are incredibly important, but it's challenging to get compelling images of mostly tiny creatures that live underwater. We looked for opportunities to shoot large invaders, such as the Asian carp that leap from the water and have infested portions of the Mississippi and its larger tributaries.

We also worked together in the field with scientists as they poisoned streams to kill sea lamprey, or picked up dead loons along Lake Erie's shore. The photographer also took a few trips on his own to find scenic areas of the Great Lakes to illustrate their beauty. The scenic shots were used mostly for our online presentation and as part of a special reprint, but there was not space for many of them in the main three-part series.

**Q: Summarize what your story found about the government's efforts to control and limit invasive species from coming into U.S. waters.**

**A:** Government has been slow to respond and in some  
*(Continued next page)*

# Great Lakes... (from page 15)

cases negligent, both in the United States and Canada. That includes the Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Coast Guard. To be fair, in some cases legal authority is fragmented and laws are inadequate, but in other cases it's clear that agencies are stalling, especially when they are strongly opposed by shipping, aquaculture and imported pet industries. As a result there are huge loopholes in the regulations and major delays in restricting specific species.

One of the stories documented how a career Fish and Wildlife employee raising concerns about Asian carp was reassigned after aquaculture lobbyists complained about him in a private meeting with then-FWS director Jamie Rappaport Clark. All the doors are wide open to invasive species, and part of the reason is political pressure.

**Q: What kind of response did it get from readers? How about any government response?**

**A:** The series received positive responses from readers, who mostly said they were not aware of the scope or immensity of the problem. Scientists who've been trying to raise the profile on this problem for two decades said it's about time the issue begins to get more attention and lengthier media treatment. Seven Great Lakes attorneys general recently filed an amicus brief in a court case to try to get the EPA to start regulating ballast water, and they also petitioned the Coast Guard to move faster on ballast water controls. The attorneys general were already working on these efforts before our series was published, but it's clear that the issue is gaining some traction.

**Q: Ballast water is an issue in just about any port that is visited by foreign ships. If someone wanted to look at what was being done in their port, what steps would you suggest they take?**

**A:** Find out how many non-indigenous species are there, who is studying them, and what effects they are having on native species. Places to start: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Union of Concerned Scientists, Northeast Midwest Institute, Sea Grant, local environmental groups concerned about a particular estuary or river, local universities.

Check with local port authorities, the U.S. Coast Guard, or possibly the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center and its National Ballast Information Clearinghouse to find out how many ships visit the port, where they come from, whether they're carrying ballast water, how important the shipping industry is to the local economy.

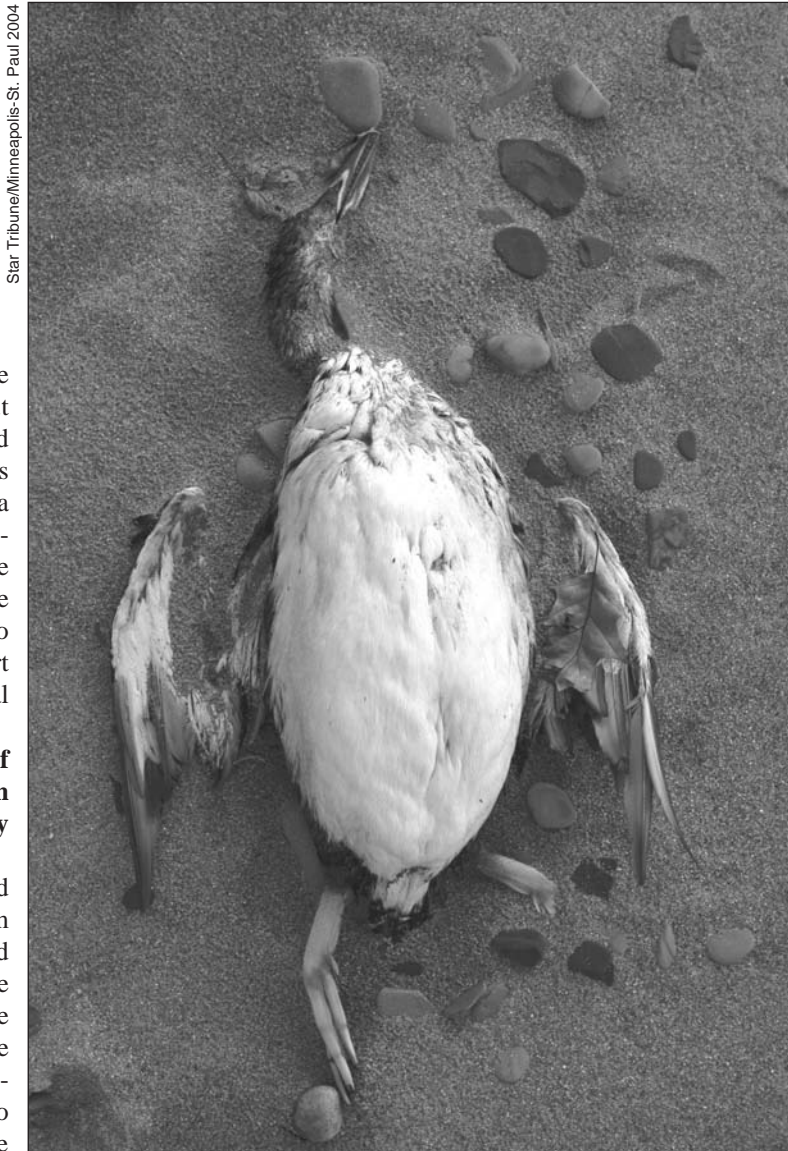
Meersman is the environment and natural resources reporter at the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* newspaper, a position he has held since 1993. Before that he reported on environmental issues for Minnesota Public Radio for 13 years. He is a former high school English teacher, and was educated at the University of San Francisco and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

He has been a University of Michigan journalism fellow and a founding SEJ board member and vice president from 1994-96. He has lectured occasionally about environmental journalism at a number of local universities

and is a member of the national advisory board for the Ted Scripps Fellowships in Environmental Journalism at the University of Colorado.

For questions, contact Meersman at 612-673-7388 or at [meersman@startribune.com](mailto:meersman@startribune.com).

View the series on the *Star Tribune* website at: [www.startribune.com/projects/](http://www.startribune.com/projects/).



A dead loon found on the Lake Erie shoreline.

*Mike Dunne is assistant editor of the SEJournal and a reporter at The Advocate in Baton Rouge, La.*

# Money... (from page 1)

In the Los Angeles area, for example, a water district director named Willard H. Murray frequented a casino owned by porn mogul Larry Flynt. There, he would have lunch. And declare the lunch a “meeting” so he could put in for a \$180 session stipend. And expense the lunch to the water district.

By the time the journey had gone full circle, the aftermath was two federal indictments back at Sacramento Suburban, a bunch of shredded credit cards at neighboring water districts, a round of ethics cleansing by the state water district association and a run at reform legislation inside the capital.

This was a basic newsroom-style investigation – piles of documents, afternoons of drudgery and moments of doubt. But remember, I don’t live in the newsroom setting, although I used to. For me, a long piece is the equivalent of a newsroom project sidebar. Two pieces can’t run on the same day. Each has to stand on its own. And for the subscriber who is actually reading the stuff, each piece has to build on the other. With about 9,000 pages of water district credit card statements, expense records and meeting stipend sheets, how does this become 30 or so editorials?

Looking back at the experience (and at my desk area, what does one do with all these records now other than burn them at the family camping trip?) I remember the donut. The sources. The sleepless moments at night mulling how to frame the records act request. The anal-retentiveness that led me to punch three holes into all those records so they could be slid into three-ringed notebooks. The sticky post-it notes. And come writing time, the fun with squeezing all those water metaphors into the copy.

Back to that donut and that source. His name is Ted Costa. For those of you who closely follow California politics, this name may sound familiar. A fellow named Ted Costa was the activist who launched the recall of Gov. Gray Davis. Yup, this is the same Ted Costa, who is the head of something called People’s Advocates.

He is also an elected director of the San Juan Water District. This is one of those 14 water districts north of my American River.

Costa is a water junkie. Our periodic donut sessions would wander from arguments over legislative redistricting to Delta water policy. Back in the fall of 2001, Costa passed on a tip. In the neighboring Sacramento Suburban Water District, he heard that the controller had just gotten fired, and that circumstances sounded fishy. As tips go, this one didn’t exactly knock the glaze off my maple bar. But it seemed worth a call.

That call went to Byron Buck. By day, he is a hotshot water consultant hired by some of the state’s biggest districts. Afflicted with the same addiction as Costa, he is an elected director at Sacramento Suburban by night. Buck and I had talked numerous times previously about all those sexy “big” water issues like salmon, the Delta and such.

Sadly, he had never thought that the night job was potentially all that interesting to the local newspaper. But with one call, he was a fountain of information, and a frustrated fountain at that. He had been trying to quietly clean up this below-the-radar district (it serves about 100,000 customers, Sacramento County has about 1.2 million residents, the Sacramento region, about 2 million). And sure enough, the controller had just been fired.

He had one public record to share, for this one was one of those personnel matters that wander in and out of privacy laws. This was a memo from the assistant general manager to the directors from a fellow named Jerry Ness, who had the gall to complain about the sleuthing that the controller had been up to. The controller had alleged that the salaried Ness and his long-time boss, DeWight Kramer, were both cashing out some questionable overtime payments – outside of the payroll system. The controller thought that salaried management wasn’t eligible for the extra pay. And she most definitely thought that no employee was to

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## Following the money: When did you last check these records?

By **MICHAEL MANSUR**

It’s the mantra of reporters: Follow the money. But how often do you follow that mantra?

Any reporter – from the environment beat to city hall to religion – should be watching how government agencies and non-profits spend taxpayer dollars. Here’s a few key records to check.

- **Personnel and payroll.** The largest part of any government budget goes to personnel. Get updated salary information on everyone. How many make more than \$100,000? Examine overtime. What are the totals by department? What’s the trend over time? Individuals? Do any double their incomes with overtime?

- **Budget/finance.** In examining a government agency’s budget, pay special attention to the notes at the bottom. Study flexible spending versus dedicated dollars, those that votes or court orders mandate how they must be spent. Study, too, the annual management letter that details problems in management, controls on spending and reconciliation of accounts. Cities and counties also must produce the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report. Also check bond prospectuses issued by cities

for things like sewer or other capital-improvement bonds.

- **Perks.** Early-retirement programs are popular. Study the formulas, paying attention to what counts as salary. Do workers get credit for overtime payments?

Cell-phone and credit-card records also can produce enlightening stories on how government officials go about their business or pleasure on the taxpayers’ dimes. How about vehicles and other benefits, such as supplemental retirement funds?

- **Property.** What does your agency own? Federal accounting standards require them to know – so not knowing is a story. If you’re looking at a city, does its own property violate city codes?

- **Other fun records.** Inspection records are often a goldmine. What does your government agency inspect or audit? The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, for example, audits state programs delegated to enforce federal law. Have you checked those recently? Another often-ignored set of records are kept by local government water departments, who probably track water losses (which can mount to millions of gallons a year in many older cities.)

# Money... (from page 17)

ever get paid outside of the payroll system that keeps track of taxable income that gets reported to the Internal Revenue Service.

Suddenly, Sacramento Suburban began to seem interesting.

But how interesting? Buck believed that the general manager traveled frequently, and by first class, but he didn't have the documents. Kramer on his own had fired this controller, and then told the board what he had done. If behind this was a pattern of misbehavior, rather than a little extra pay on the side, what would

did. No receipts. Paperless travel! If Porter went Southwest (\$200 to Baltimore was a deal, \$400 to \$600 a standard range back in 2001), he could have pocketed an easy grand from that travel advance. Income. Unreported income.

In one cash advance, Kramer pocketed \$1,600 to fly to a water conference in the state of Washington. Then on the district credit card, he rented a car in Sacramento for the exact same dates and put in for hotel expenses between Sacramento and Washington. He drove. He didn't fly. It was, in the world of water metaphors, a documented double dip.

The directors got paid \$200 a "meeting," a word that has no definition for water districts under state law. They get to define a meeting however they please. But they did have to itemize their meetings on those monthly stipend sheets. An airplane ride was a meeting. Each day of a water conference, another meeting. The flight home – meeting.

I didn't remember the plane landing. Seven years into editorial writing about water policy, I was suddenly realizing how profitable Disneyland could be to the 2,600 water district leaders in attendance. I got to the Magic Kingdom and the Disneyland Hotel about midnight. I recognized several faces at the poolside bar. I looked

straight ahead, not in the mood for small talk or to explain why I was walking around Disneyland with this big satchel of documents. I needed time and didn't have any. A controller had just gotten canned. It was becoming clearer precisely why. I was 500 miles from home. I was in Disneyland.

Back at *The Bee* the next afternoon, I huddled with my editor, David Holwerk. Coming to *The Bee* after many years of covering government corruption in Kentucky, first as a reporter and then as an editor (he was in Duluth, Minnesota immediately before coming to Sacramento), Holwerk suspected before I did that something was afoot inside all these water districts. There were so many of them. They controlled so much money. They were so obscure. I told him the good news – that his instincts were right – and the bad – that we were late to a breaking story. So for this round, we wrote and reported on the fly.

Salvo number one was "A Suburban Stench." It detailed the firing of the controller and her findings about the unauthorized overtime, and how this smelled like something bigger. A little meat, and a little tease.

I needed some time to crunch a few numbers: Individual expenses per year (credit card statements plus expense statements plus stipend statements). And expenses per trip, to say, Montreal,

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Photo courtesy of SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER/Paul Joseph Brown



reveal this one way or the other? What records act request would shed some light?

In this case, a simple records act request did the trick: Two years of all credit card statements for the district plastic held by the general manager, that assistant general manager and all the directors. All their expense requests. All their requests for meeting pay. Reported income to the IRS on those annual W-2 forms. Basically, every document that showed how they spent the district money on themselves.

This was maybe 500 to 700 pages. The district (to its credit) delivered them to the paper late one afternoon just before I had to get aboard Southwest Airlines to head to a water conference (The water association invited me to Disneyland, the questionable site of its annual conference, with no idea what was about to unfold). I took the documents aboard in a satchel, and plopped them on my lap to discourage any passengers from sitting next to me (this has worked since then, but not always). With a little room and an hour in the sky, I scanned the contents. And I couldn't believe what I saw.

It was so blatant, and so illegal. Director William Porter, as an example, would put in for a \$1,600 cash advance for a plane ticket to and from Washington, D.C. What he actually paid for that ticket, no one knew. He didn't submit a receipt. Nobody ever

home of the automated water meter reading symposium (five days, five from Sac Suburban attended). Meeting pay for local public business versus travel. Travel advance pay.

Some questions were also dangling out there. What, for example, did the IRS think about the utter lack of receipts to back up travel advances (Answer: This is income, as in unreported income, and a no-no) And why did Kramer always fly first class? Answer: Because he once sat next to a fat passenger back in coach and swore he would never endure the indignity again (He told me this in an interview – taped thank goodness. Who would believe it otherwise?) And were these water districts functioning democracies with regularly contested democracies, or were they on autopilot?

Milking the meeting meter became an editorial. The delicious anecdote was how directors turned a single-day ethics conference into two meeting stipends – one payment for the drive down to San Francisco the day before the actual conference, and another payment for attending the actual ethics training. Some of those other calculations, like how several directors made more meeting money thanks to outside travel than in-district meetings, came in handy.

The “paperless travel” system of cashing in those airfare advances, and leaving out the receipts, was another.

DeWight Kramer, 20-some years of first-class travel on district ratepayers, and his explanation, spoke for itself.

And meanwhile, those Monday night meetings at the water district office, just down from the suburban Trader Joe’s store, were providing weekly fodder. The board, divided between the frequent travelers (majority) and frugal fliers (minority) was in open warfare. The lone long-time gadfly, a retired executive named LeRoy Munsch, suddenly had company in the seats. Ratepayers were waving the clippings at Kramer and the gang and wondering why the controller was fired. Suddenly Kramer retired (he was 80 at the time). An outside auditor was hired. Eventually, Kramer and assistant general manager Ness faced a variety of federal tax evasion/conspiracy charges. Kramer eventually entered a guilty plea to some charges. Ness, as of this writing, awaits trial.

Mission accomplished? Not quite.

There are all these other water districts in Sacramento (each wave of development since World War II seemed to require creating a new water district rather than expanding an existing one). What had they been up to? We picked a dozen of them to look at. And we sent them basically the same records act request that had been sent to Sacramento Suburban – all expenses by elected leaders and top management, income as reported to IRS, expense policies, etc.

Some got the records back in two weeks. The longest took two months. That turned out to be the smallest water district we looked at. It turned out to have three employees, all from the same family, the Bedalls (two brothers, one daughter, and the resulting editorial: “All in the family.”)

One water district routinely expensed golf – from that Disneyland conference to a previous gathering at, of all places, Pebble Beach (editorial: “Water hazard.”)

Ted Costa’s water district, San Juan, had been flying wives to water conferences a decade earlier, which led to a grand jury investigation, which led to a district promise to tear up the credit cards. But the district then quietly redistributed the credit cards (but not to Costa) for travel to New Orleans and beyond. (Editorial: “Revolving credit.”)

Another editorial detailed how water directors with credit cards from one district spent 17 times more on meals at Disneyland than did directors from a neighboring district who carried no government plastic (Editorial “Power of plastic.”)

One water district hadn’t a contested election in more than a decade, a revolving door of incumbents, resignations and appointments mid-term (Editorial: “Elections? What elections?”)

These ideas were pretty much at the surface of these records and interviews. It was the next and final round, the one that required those three-ring notebooks, that stretched the brain. The insatiable boss wanted more. Let’s review a sampling of water districts elsewhere in the state. Ones that had been in trouble in the past. Ones with reputations, good and bad. The same record request went out.

When it took two boxes to contain the records of two districts, West and Central Basin of suburban Los Angeles, I knew I was in trouble.

The manila folder system was going to fail. I needed an industrial puncher to thread all these pages into notebooks (three-inch binders at Office Depot proved to be the best buy and a manageable size). Grunt work. But hey, I was getting paid.

The post-it notes were to flag anything interesting in that first round of thumbing through the pages. The second round was to write on the post-it note what was interesting (golf, Hustler Casino, a three-figure lunch at Wolfgang’s, dues paid by the water district to a taxpayers association, etc.) By the time the mail had all arrived, the haul was a couple dozen notebooks of documents, many dozens of post-it notes. Lots of ingredients – prime rib, a porn mogul, a single name that kept popping up – but not soup. Not at first. It took me a while to see what I had. And had I not organized the records in a way that allowed me to flip through them, race from one post-it note to another, I might never have truly appreciated this name that kept popping up, Willard H. Murray Jr. He was no double dipper. He was in a league of his own.

Editorial: The Triple Dipper.

The piece opened this way:

*Willard H. Murray Jr. had a problem.*

*He was about to max out his monthly meeting pay as a publicly elected director of the Water Replenishment District of Southern California. That’s an obscure (but large) agency that keeps Los Angeles Basin’s wells from going dry.*

*State law allows Murray to get paid for 10 district meetings a month. He had already filed for 10 meetings back in November 2001, counting the first two days of a water conference at a San Diego hotel as a “meeting.”*

*But that conference had two more days to go, which meant that two more meeting stipends were about to slip away. What was Murray to do?*

*No problem. He transformed.*

*On Nov. 28, Murray went to bed in his San Diego hotel as a leader of the replenishment district. He woke up the next morning, according to payroll, as the representative of an entirely different water agency covering some of the same territory, the West Basin Municipal Water District. Since 1999, he has been West Basin’s appointed representative on yet a third water district, Metropolitan, the giant wholesaler for all of Southern California.*

*All these water titles came in handy for Murray in November 2001. While he couldn’t make more meeting pay as a replenish-*

*(Continued next page)*

## Money... (from page 19)

*ment leader, there was still money to be made representing West Basin. So in the middle of the San Diego water conference, he switched from Mr. Replenishment to Mr. West Basin, and milked this district of meeting pay until this last reservoir of potential revenue finally ran dry.*

Thirty-some editorials later, the journey into this world of water districts was over (there will, I'm sure, be return visits). I learned some lessons about the value of morning chats over donuts, the right net (the records act request, carefully crafted), an

insatiable boss and a three-ring notebook. Sometimes the big fish aren't in the flashiest pond. Sometimes they are strangely close to home, in bland suburbia, inside governments that look utterly boring on the outside – yet oh, so juicy, on the inside.

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*Tom Philp writes editorials for The Sacramento Bee. His editorials on water districts, the Water Barons, won first place in the National Headliner Award for editorial writing.*

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## Fagin... (from page 2)

voting rights as active-category members. Even so, the situation has bothered some of us over the years, including some who have served as non-voting representatives on the board. It also bothers the SEJ board's current vice president for membership, Peter Fairley, an active-category freelancer based in Victoria, Canada, who has always taken a special interest in looking out for the needs of SEJ members who aren't staff reporters for established media outlets. Starting last year, Peter began talking to other board members about possible ways to develop a more democratic system. The board's membership committee, which Peter chairs, started discussing the issue, too.

Lots of ideas were kicked around, from all sectors of Carlin's "idiot" to "maniac" spectrum. Some board members started out thinking that no change at all was needed and that academics and associates should continue not to have a voting voice in SEJ governance. Others, however, wondered out loud whether SEJ should take the radical step of abolishing membership categories altogether. There were lots of middle-ground proposals, too. The board discussed whether associates and academics should get proportional representation on the SEJ board (at current membership levels, that would mean two seats each on a board with 15 voting members), and whether they should be allowed to hold board office. Eventually, the board reached a rough consensus that associates and academics should get one vote each on the board and that SEJ's officers should all be active-category members.

That still left the thorny issue of future attempts to amend the bylaws. Some board members worried that as SEJ evolved there might be attempts to change the group's membership rules (the current proposal leaves those rules entirely unchanged). Perhaps someone might even push to rewrite the bylaws to allow public relations people and professional advocates to join SEJ, a move many of us think would be disastrous because it would change the fundamental character of our organization.

Because of these concerns, the board agreed that the rules should be toughened to make it more difficult to change the bylaws in the future. That led the board to the "two-thirds" rule, which would ensure that the bylaws could not be changed again unless the proposal had overwhelming support among the membership and on the SEJ board – a board in which 13 of the 15 voting members would be active-category members.

Some board members, however, still felt that an additional safeguard was needed. They pushed for language that would con-

tinue to permit only active-category members to vote on bylaws proposals, not associates or academics. That idea was defeated in a 6-5 vote. The board then took a final vote on the entire bylaws amendment package, approving it, 9-2, at its July 24 board meeting in Burlington, Vt. (Two board members were absent.)

Has the board majority found the right speed for change in our organization? Are we idiots? Maniacs? That's up to you. If you're an active-category member, please cast your ballot, either by mail or in person at the Oct. 22 membership meeting in Pittsburgh. (To repeat, if you're an associate or academic member, you're not eligible to vote on proposals to amend the bylaws – though that would change for future proposals if these proposed amendments are approved.) And no matter what type of SEJ member you are, please speak up and make your views known. Board members can also answer any questions you may have, either via e-mail or at the Oct. 22 meeting.

Remember, too, that there are also six board seats up for election this year. Four will be selected by a vote of active-category members, and one each will be chosen by associate and academic members, respectively. If the proposed bylaws amendments pass, the newly elected academic and associate representatives will have a vote on the board for the first time. Please take the time to read the candidate statements (they're posted at [www.sej.org](http://www.sej.org)) and cast your vote. The people you choose are going to have their feet on SEJ's gas pedal for at least the next three years.

Whoever you choose for the board, and whatever speed they select for our group, I have a lot of confidence that we won't end up in a ditch no matter how the vote on the proposed bylaws amendments turns out. At SEJ, we know who we are, and we know where we're going.

As for me, I'm going to slide over to the passenger seat and try hard not to shout "idiot" or "maniac" too often. I have two years remaining in my term on the SEJ board, but my two years as president are about to end. This eighth presidential column in *SEJournal* is my last. In Pittsburgh, after the membership votes to fill those six board positions, the reconstituted board will choose my successor as president. Thank you for the opportunity to serve this amazing group. I can't wait to find out where we're going next.

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*Dan Fagin of Newsday, and president of SEJ, is frequently ticketed for speeding but claims he rarely deserves it.*

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# Bylaws... (from page 5)

include journalists who did not do lobbying and public relations work on environmental issues but worked for organizations that did. This group was put into an “associate” category, and so were part-time journalists and educators as well as non-journalists who work for journalism-related organizations.

Like all of its predecessors, the current SEJ board believes the three-category system, which is also common in other journalism organizations, has served SEJ well and should not change. The board believes that effective control of SEJ should continue to rest with the active-category members, and that the ban on environmental lobbying and public relations work should continue to be strictly enforced. SEJ’s credibility, and thus its effectiveness, depends on preserving our group’s identity as a group of, by and for working journalists, the SEJ board believes.

## **Then why is the SEJ board proposing any changes?**

Nine of the 11 voting members of the SEJ board present at the July 24 meeting (two were absent) voted in favor of the proposed amendments. Those who voted “yes” pointed out that associate and academic members pay dues, fully participate in SEJ programs, and play key roles in advancing our group’s mission to improve environmental journalism. It’s only fair, they argued, to grant the academic and associate representatives to the board the right to vote, and also to allow academic and associate members to participate in membership votes on bylaws amendments. Proponents of the change also said SEJ has matured into a strong organization with a well-established identity as a journalist-led group. They argued that SEJ can extend voting rights to academic and associate members while still keeping the organization firmly in the control of journalists who do not work for groups that lobby or do public relations work on environmental issues.

## **What safeguards have advocates of the bylaws changes proposed in an effort to ensure that SEJ continues to be controlled by full-time journalists who do not work for groups that lobby or do public-relations work on environmental issues?**

Under this proposal, all but two of the voting seats on the SEJ board would be reserved for active-category representatives, elected by active members. As a result, active members would continue to dominate the board because they would hold 13 of the 15 seats. (The proposed bylaws amendments would allow anywhere from 11 to 19 active-member board seats, but the SEJ board intends to keep the total at 13.) As is currently the case, only active members would be eligible to serve in the five board offices: president, vice president for programs, vice president for membership, treasurer and secretary. And in an effort to ensure that any future bylaws change could not go forward without broad support on the SEJ board and among the voting membership, the bylaws proposal would require a two-thirds majority in both bodies before any future bylaws change could take effect. Currently, and in this fall’s election, only a simple majority is required.

These requirements, the board majority decided, strike a fair balance between the desire to give associate and academic members voting representation and the imperative to preserve SEJ’s identity as an independent organization of working journalists.

## **What are the chief arguments against the proposed bylaws amendments?**

The two board members who voted against the proposal said the safeguards proposed by the board majority are not strong enough. They said there is no compelling reason to alter SEJ’s longstanding policy of not giving associate and academic members full voting rights, and contended that the current system of non-voting board representation already gives academic and associate members an effective voice on the SEJ board.

Specifically, opponents said they were worried about the chance that future bylaws changes could shift control of the group away from active-category members, perhaps even in a single day at the annual membership meeting if a quorum (ten percent of all members eligible to vote) is present. To guard against that possibility, they proposed that academic and associate members continue to be ineligible to vote on amending the bylaws. This proposal failed on a 6-5 vote, with the board majority contending it would be unfair and inconsistent to tell associate and academic members that they can have voting representation on the SEJ board but cannot vote on future bylaws amendments. The board majority also argued that requiring a two-thirds majority among the voting membership and on the SEJ board, and mandating that 13 of 15 board seats be reserved for active-category members, will ensure that no future bylaws amendments can be adopted without very strong support from active-category members.

Three of the five board members who were on the losing side of the 6-5 vote then shifted to vote in favor of the final proposal now before the membership, which passed 9-2.

## **Why change the language defining active, associate and academic membership?**

The language in the current bylaws is vague and does not fully reflect the policies the membership committee of the SEJ board has been following since 1998 in determining whether an applicant is eligible to join, and whether he or she should be listed as an active, associate and academic member. The definitions of the three membership categories that this proposal would insert into the bylaws are taken directly from the written policies adopted by the SEJ board in 1998. (You can read those membership policies at [www.sej.org](http://www.sej.org).) So these proposed changes would write SEJ’s longstanding policies into the bylaws but would not change the way SEJ makes eligibility decisions.

## **Why are only active members allowed to vote on the proposed bylaws amendment?**

Because that’s the procedure spelled out in the SEJ bylaws. This would change for future bylaws votes if the proposal is approved because associate and academic members, as well as active members, would be eligible to vote.

Why not allow proportional representation on the SEJ board, instead of limiting academic and associate members to one seat each?

The SEJ board believes that limiting the academic and associate representatives to one vote each on the board accomplishes the purpose of giving academic and associate members a real say in the governance of our group while ensuring that SEJ’s identity

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## Bylaws... (from page 21)

as an organization controlled by independent, working journalists is preserved.

The board currently consists of 13 voting active representatives, one non-voting associate representative, one non-voting academic representative and one non-voting position reserved for SEJ's founding president, Jim Detjen. If the proposed bylaws amendments are approved, the new SEJ board would consist of 13 voting active representatives, one voting associate representative, one voting academic representative, and the non-voting position for the founding president. Under proportional representation, which the SEJ board is not proposing, board seats would be allocated in a slightly different way. Based on current membership totals, there would be 11 active representatives, two associate representatives and two academic representatives. (SEJ's total membership, as of July 2004, consisted of 961 active members, 219 academic members and 201 associate members. There were also six "honorary" members designated by the SEJ board.)

### **What process did the SEJ board follow in drafting this proposal?**

The board has been discussing the possibility of a bylaws amendment for more than a year. The membership committee began drafting a specific proposal early this year, ultimately approving a version that was further revised by the board's executive committee (consisting of SEJ's five officers). SEJ's lawyer then reviewed the proposal and recommended minor language changes to ensure consistency with District of Columbia law, where our group is chartered. (SEJ's actual headquarters is in Jenkintown, Pa.) The full SEJ board then approved the final version after extensive discussion.

Where can I read the actual changes in the bylaws language

proposed by the board?

SEJ has created a special "bylaws proposal" page from our home page at [www.sej.org](http://www.sej.org) (click on the "SEJ Elections" icon) that will allow you to read an annotated version of the bylaws, with each of the proposed additions and deletions marked and explained. If you'd rather receive a paper version of the proposed changes, please contact Chris Rigel at the SEJ office and she will arrange to mail or fax you a copy. Her e-mail address is [crigel@sej.org](mailto:crigel@sej.org) and her phone number is 215-884-8177.

### **When and where will I have a chance to ask questions or express my opinion?**

Please feel free to address any questions you have to a member of the SEJ board. Our phone numbers and e-mail address are listed on the SEJ web site. We also expect that some SEJ members will ask questions or express their views via the SEJ-talk list-serv. Finally, the board hopes there will be a full discussion of the bylaws proposal at this year's membership meeting, Oct. 22, during SEJ's 2004 annual conference in Pittsburgh.

### **How do I vote?**

If you're an active-category member and are up-to-date with your dues, you're eligible to vote and may do so via mail ballot or in person at the membership meeting.

### **How much support is needed for the bylaws proposal to pass?**

If at least 10 percent of all eligible active-category members vote, and at least half of those voting approve the proposal, then the bylaws changes will take effect immediately after the votes are tabulated by the SEJ Elections Committee at the completion of the Oct. 22 membership meeting. If less than 10 percent of eligible voters vote, or if less than half of those voting vote "yes," then the proposal fails and the status quo continues.

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## Forests... (from page 13)

control. So we do have a lot of research on thinning, just not related to fire." Former Forest Service Chief Mike Dombeck agrees.

Scott Stephens, an assistant professor of Fire Science at the University of California, Berkeley, says that any research to mitigate forest fires is maybe six years old at best. "I'm afraid the Forest Service thinks solutions are already known, and they are now going to implement them on a large scale," he says.

One of the first projects to provide good quantitative data on fire mitigation is the federally funded Fire and Fire Surrogate Project. The project encompasses 13 different forest types across the nation, and each site has four different plots of land to examine different fire control strategies, including prescribed fire, mechanical thinning, and mechanical thinning followed by prescribed fire. Other plots remain untreated to serve as controls.

Stephens heads up the project site at Berkeley's Blodgett Experimental Forest in the foothills of the Sierra Mountains. Now in its fourth year, the Blodgett study has found that the most effective means to reduce fires is not thinning trees but removing surface fuels such as brush. The second most important component to remove is the "ladder fuels" such as small trees and tall shrubs, and the final component is crown fuel in the tree canopy.

While the ecosystem at Blodgett is different from places

recently scorched by catastrophic fires, such as Los Alamos, N.M., and southern California, Stephens says treating the surface fuels through prescribed burns would still be the best strategy to mitigate fire. The USFS, however, prefers mechanical thinning. In some cases, it's simply logging.

So now you're probably wondering, why thinning projects are being hurried up if there's no evidence supporting the need for streamlining and why the Forest Service is spending \$476 million this year on thinning projects when they have no science to guide these projects. That's where the politics begin and this article must end.

But a good place to start would be with the man who oversees the Forest Service, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Deputy Under Secretary of Natural Resources and Environment, Mark Rey. Prior to gaining this position, Rey served in a variety of industry positions, including vice president for the American Forest and Paper Association, a timber-industry lobbying group that supported passage of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act.

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## 9/11... (from page 4)

lators have filed a Freedom of Information Act request asking for more data on communications between the White House and EPA.

“EPA’s decisions after the terrorist attacks have a direct impact on the health and lives of New Yorkers,” charged Nadler. “Two years later the EPA still fails to answer questions from the public, including who at the White House was involved in doctoring public statements regarding air quality following the attacks and why the EPA still refuses to clean up indoor spaces contaminated with WTC dust.”<sup>6</sup>

Many New Yorkers and observers of the issue came to feel – and continue to feel – that the government misled the public, prompting the press to leave the subject alone, and causing a buildup of public distrust. Thousands of workers and residents still suffer respiratory ailments from breathing the contaminated air.<sup>7</sup> So how the government responded two years ago is more than just an academic question.

In the heat and smoke of the moment, should the agencies’ messages have been more precautionary? If so, what were the factors leading to failures in communicating? What lessons are there in this episode for the future, in the ugly event of another terrorist attack or some other disaster?

The World Trade Center is often seen as a symbol of wealth and power. As an icon, it also functioned as a symbol of communication. With its antenna thrust upwards –1,368 feet, or more than a quarter of a mile – into the sky, the taller skyscraper, 1 World Trade Center, was once the tallest building on the East Coast, making it an ideal site for communications transmission.<sup>8</sup> From a distance, one might even say it resembled a giant cell phone.

All of New York City’s TV stations used the legendary 351-foot antenna of that soaring building, as did many radio stations. Tower 1 and its twin housed a virtual forest of other antennas – 98 in all – on nearly an acre of rooftop, serving a wide range of networks – particularly those centered on public safety – before they went dead that fateful morning on Sept. 11, 2001.

So when the towers came crashing down, communications and information about the crisis became critical commodities, especially when it came to public health and safety. Kelly McKinney, associate commissioner for Regulatory and Environmental Health Services for the New York City Department of Health (DOH) got off the subway, just after the first plane had hit the South Tower, to find his building being evacuated and his cell phone useless. “The technology you rely on most will fail first!” he says.<sup>9</sup> He soon learned that the city’s state of the art emergency command center had also been destroyed.

Tragically, police and fire officials and emergency personnel were unable to communicate with each other. A New Jersey volunteer fire fighter, Glenn Corbett, for example, recounted sadly watching his colleagues desperately trying to send emergency messages mounting rescue operations inside the Twin Towers. “It was such a tragedy to see the battalion chief of the first battalion and the first fire chief on the scene of the Trade Center trying to communicate with other officers up in the building and we saw on national television...He kept calling and calling and there was no answer,” he said.<sup>10</sup>

Even though the city’s complete communications infrastructure, as well as its command center, had been destroyed, public

health and environmental agencies had to arrive on the scene and render quick “size-ups.” McKinney’s first response was to send out trouble-shooters to test for biological, chemical and radioactive threats. “Their primary direction was to be the Department’s eyes on the scene, and to communicate to us detailed descriptions of emerging health hazards,” McKinney says.<sup>11</sup>

Coordinating communication among agencies was a “huge challenge for us,” EPA’s Horinko admitted, reflecting on the events two years later.<sup>12</sup> During the first 24 hours, local environmental health department professionals and others faced unprecedented challenges, including mountains of dust and debris containing mostly pulverized cement, fiberglass, glass, and building materials, including as yet unknown and varying amounts of toxic metals, burning plastics and fuels, not to mention smoke and fumes from the building fires.

Yet one of the city’s first decisions was to declare lower Manhattan and the ground zero area environmentally “safe” – only seven days later.

“Given the scope of the tragedy from last week, I am glad to reassure the people of New York and Washington, D.C., that their air is safe to breathe and their water is safe to drink,” declared then EPA administrator Christie Whitman. New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said that tests of air and water had turned up “no significant problems.”<sup>13</sup>

Three months later, fires still burned and smoldered beneath the World Trade Center wreckage, releasing high levels of benzene, an organic compound that can lead to leukemia, bone marrow damage and other diseases after long-term exposure, as well as other toxic compounds, such as dioxin.<sup>14</sup> Besides this, the dust created by the initial building collapse and the debris being trucked out – most of it potentially laden with asbestos – was brought through open doors and windows, through ventilation systems and tracked in on shoes, into homes, offices and schools in the area.

Although the official word was that ordinary citizens were at no real risk from being in contact with the ash and dust remains of the trade towers, some recognized the unique issues immediately and urged greater precautions. After all, Ground Zero was a disaster site like no other – with hazards everywhere. Shards of steel lay upon shards of steel, shifting and unstable, uncovering red hot metal beams excavated from deep beneath layers of sub-floors, exposing further dark crevasses. All around the 16-acre site lay millions of piles of debris, covered in dust, with noxious smoke smoldering up, carrying unknown toxins, from benzene to heavy metals, into surrounding neighborhoods.

The New York Environmental Law and Justice Project (NYELJP), an advocacy group, was one of several groups that began taking samples of the dust and debris to do its own independent tests and found toxins like asbestos and fiberglass at higher levels than the government was reporting. Within several weeks, too, The New York Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH), began seeing workers turning up with asthma and respiratory problems, and urged rescue workers who worked for prolonged periods to be cautious of the dust.

“Many of the workers involved in the World Trade Center recovery and clean-up operation have received safety and health

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## 9/11... (from page 23)

training, but many other workers will be facing hazards that are unfamiliar, with the potential to cause serious illness, injury or death," wrote Jonathan Bennett, communications director for NYCOSH, in one of several fact-sheets released starting Sept. 21.<sup>15</sup>

These groups worked to identify exposed populations, especially the undocumented and day laborers and the uninsured, and to get information to the public, along with other organizations, such as the Mount Sinai-Irving J. Selikoff Clinical Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine. Dr. Philip Landrigan of Mt. Sinai also recognized the vacuum in communication. "Many offices and apartments were coated with dust that came in through shattered windows or inadequately protected air handling systems," wrote Landrigan. "One piece of bright news is that many office buildings with alert maintenance staffs rapidly shut down their air intake systems on 11 September and thus kept out much of the dust. Residential buildings, where staff were fewer in number and generally less well trained, fared less well."<sup>16</sup>

In this confusing climate, the city department of health was besieged by phone calls from residents and others. The Health Department was not quite as definite as EPA's Whitman had been. While encouraging people to move back to their homes and restore their lives to normalcy, it urged citizens to take precautions with dust and ash, Sandra Mullin of the city's Department of Health told MSNBC Online, "to protect people with underlying respiratory problems." The agency advised "simple house-keeping tips like removing shoes, keeping windows closed and changing filters in air conditioners."<sup>17</sup>

Among the general public, however, concerns over smoke and dust didn't really erupt until weeks after EPA and Mayor Giuliani had declared the area safe to return to, when, sometime in October 2001, community newspapers began reporting local disgruntlement and confusion.<sup>18</sup> Low-income people living in areas like Chinatown didn't even have computers to visit the websites city officials promoted.

Behind the scenes, too, experts were critical. In a series of memos critical of EPA's response to 9/11, government whistleblower Cate Jenkins, a senior chemist in the EPA's hazardous waste division, argued that asbestos levels in lower Manhattan were high enough to declare the entire area a Superfund site. She compared dust samples drawn from New York apartments in an independent study with similar samples drawn from houses in Libby, Mont., a small town designated as a Superfund site after a surrounding vermiculite mine released deadly asbestos fibers into the air.

Questions continued to bubble up. In December, for example, Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg faced the quandary of whether to allow residents' dust-contaminated cars to be returned to them. At first, the city health commissioner had said they could be potentially contaminated and therefore unsafe to return to their owners. Then the agency flip-flopped and told car owners they could pick them up at the landfill, giving them specific instructions on HEPA vacuuming them.

Some officials monitoring air, water and soil admitted that pollutants did "climb to hazardous levels" on occasion. "The further you get from the site, the data does not demonstrate significant risks to people," William J. Muszynski, acting regional administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, told a reporter for CNN. "I think you can sensationalize – I mean, I

think you can look at the numbers, a spike, and believe that number is overly significant," Muszynski said. "Most of what we do is based on long-term exposure."<sup>19</sup>

By December, *The Wall Street Journal* ran a Page 1 story describing growing public fears about air quality and indoor dust. "In the weeks since Sept. 11, government agencies testing the air near ground zero have reached a nearly unanimous conclusion: There is no significant long-term health risk for area workers and residents. Yet hundreds, and possibly thousands, of people who live, work or go to school in lower Manhattan have experienced persistent sore throats and hacking coughs. Area physicians report a surge in new or worsened asthma cases: How to explain the contradiction?"<sup>20</sup>

Health and environmental issues should have drawn more attention, but their full impacts didn't emerge until too late – at least four weeks late.<sup>21</sup> That failure in communication set the stage for little news coverage, especially since national news outlets were already stepping up foreign news.<sup>22</sup>

At first, the media least concerned with reporting on the environmental impacts were the local New York City papers, according to journalist Susan Stranahan, writing in the *American Journalism Review*.<sup>23</sup>

"Not since the 1979 accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania have reporters and government officials faced such an Everest-size task of communicating complex information to a frightened public," wrote Stranahan. "All too often after 9/11, however, journalists simply accepted the party line from city, state and federal officials. With a few notable exceptions, the New York media took months to zero in on a story that touched the lives of thousands."

The first to report on the environmental health aspects of the disaster were not *The New York Times* but national outlets such as Newsweek, MSNBC, CNN, and others.<sup>24</sup> The first local reporter to flag discrepancies between official statements about health risks and independent studies showing otherwise, however, was *Daily News* reporter Juan Gonzalez.<sup>25</sup> On October 26, 2001, Gonzalez obtained internal government reports showing that toxic chemicals and metals were released into the environment by the fiery collapse of the twin towers.<sup>26</sup>

The media, by and large, focused on other, "bigger" themes related to terrorism, everything from the cultural and geopolitical issues surrounding the attacks – Islam and the Middle East; the immediate economic dislocation; the search and rescue operations; the process of criminal investigations and the suspects. In a paper on the patterns of media coverage of the terrorist attacks, Christine Rodrigue,<sup>27</sup> a geographer at California State University, identifies ten main themes – and environment is not even one of them.

That's surprising considering, at least on the local level, the physical environment around the World Trade Center had changed drastically – from giant piles of rubble strewn everywhere to trucks hauling debris to empty buildings and displaced residents and the fact that it was difficult to breathe.

Two years later, some of those closest to the event concede that need for better risk communication was one of the biggest lessons learned from the events of 9/11. Kelly McKinney at the city health department admitted that his department needed to communicate what they knew "every day and all day long." He

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added, "If it is a hazard, be clear about what you know and don't know – and where the uncertainty lies."<sup>28</sup>

Some scientists now criticize the agencies for letting people come back to lower Manhattan so quickly. This was a chaotic time, but there was no basis for the city and federal government to state that the environment was safe to reinhabit so quickly, says Paul Lioy, professor of environmental and community medicine at Rutgers University. "People came back, but they never should have been allowed to be back," says Lioy. "No one should have been back at work. Children should definitely have not been back in school."<sup>29</sup>

So far the White House has issued no response to the Democrats' call for further investigation into who directed the EPA to assure New Yorkers that there was no health threat posed by the air pollution created by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Others point the finger beyond EPA.

"I wish that the public health leadership had stepped up and added some health perspective during the first few months, when there was so much uncertainty about the dangers in the dust," says Dr. Steven Markowitz, a professor of community health and social medicine at the City University of New York Medical School, in Flushing, N.Y. "It should not have just been left to the environmental experts to communicate the need for precautions."<sup>30</sup>

Congressman Nadler and other advocates in downtown New York say they feel vindicated by the EPA inspector general's two reports and are glad they were finally released. But Nadler points out that while EPA has now vowed to do a better job of risk communicating in the future, the agency has refused to solve the glaring failing identified in the IG report: A full cleanup of the dust in New York, as required under presidential directive after a terrorist incident.

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*Francesca Lyman is a freelance columnist who also reports for MSNBC. She began reporting on 9/11 environmental questions within days of the attack.*

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## Enforcement... (from page 10)

mitted by the companies to the agency. The EPA claimed the documents could not be released because they contained confidential business information.

We filed a Freedom of Information Act request, and have been told we will receive the records, without any of the proprietary information.

Still, using mostly court records, we discovered the EPA quietly pushed back deadlines in some consent decrees and attempted to weaken required pollution controls at a Delaware City, Del., refinery.

The two-day series garnered a lot of response from around the country. One group, the Republicans for Environmental Protection, said our series of stories "had to come and we as conservatives must face it."

The project was reported by Scott Streater, environment reporter, Jeff Claassen, the computer-reporting specialist, and Seth Borenstein, a Knight-Ridder Washington Bureau reporter who specializes in environment and health reporting.

You can check out the series at [www.dfw.com/mld/dfw/news/nation/9184148.htm](http://www.dfw.com/mld/dfw/news/nation/9184148.htm).

# Society of Environmental Journalists

## 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference

### Agenda Sneak Peek:

- SEJ Awards Presentation
- Thursday Tours
- Plenary Sessions
- Concurrent Panel Sessions
- Computer Workshops
- Network Lunch
- Saturday Tours
- Carnegie Museum of Natural History
- Sunday Morning at the National Aviary
- Party on the Gateway Partyliner

For details, please visit

[www.sej.org](http://www.sej.org)

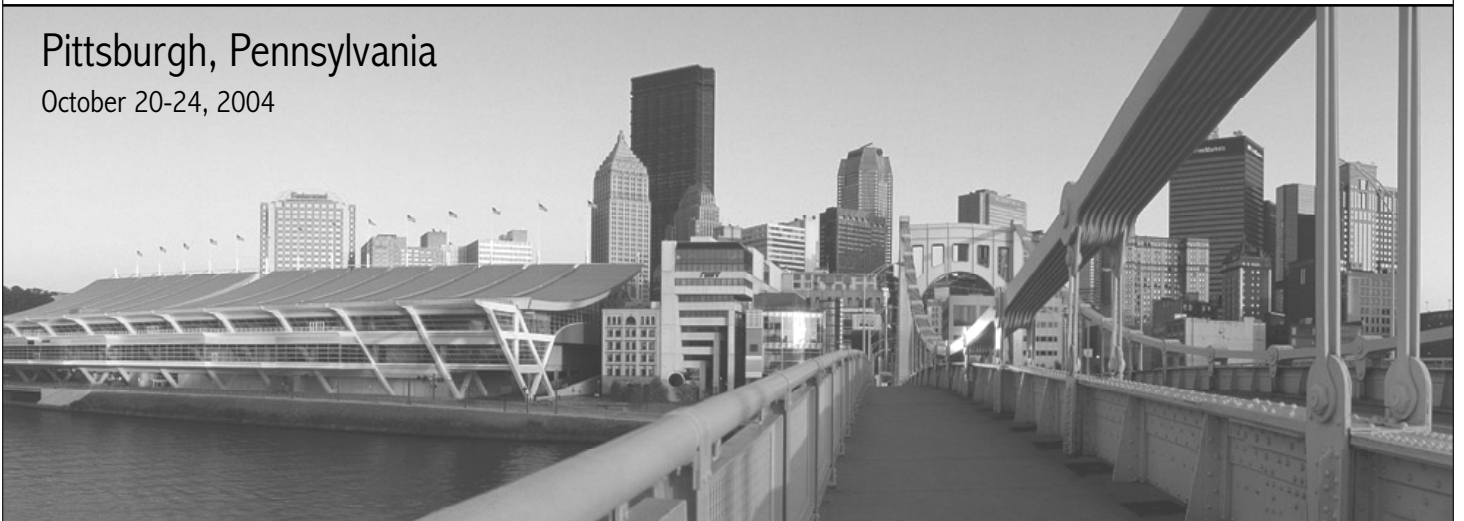
*Pittsburgh, at the height of the industrial revolution, deserved its description as “hell with the lid off,” and its “Smoky City” title. But anyone telling you that’s how it is now is just blowing smoke. The ‘Burgh is a rust belt city, but one that’s undergone a transformation. Just as it occupies the valley where the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers meet to form the Ohio, the city’s industrial past has braided with an environmental history that dates to Rachel Carson to produce a metropolis where air quality has improved, old mill sites have been reclaimed and streams that once ran iron-orange with mine pollution are stocked with trout.*

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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

October 20-24, 2004



## Fighting for the forests, exploring the changing climate

### Death in the redwoods

**A GOOD FOREST FOR DYING: THE TRAGIC DEATH OF A YOUNG MAN ON THE FRONT LINES OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL WARS**

By Patrick Beach  
 Doubleday, \$24.95

By JIM ROSSI

Northern California's rainy, rugged, remote Humboldt County has gained worldwide recognition for two things: the planet's tallest redwood trees and some of its finest marijuana. Both things brought David Nathan "Gypsy" Chain there from Texas, where in 1998 he became the only direct fatality of the timber war between the Pacific Lumber Company and Earth First!. In *Austin American-Statesman* reporter Patrick Beach's book, Gypsy's story serves as a microcosm of the timber conflict precipitated by the 1985 hostile takeover of the lumber company by corporate raider Charles Hurwitz.

I began my career as a freelance writer for Humboldt's *North Coast Journal* in 2003, and have visited most of the places and met many of the people described in "A Good Forest for Dying." Beach gets the logging history spot on – neither side is completely right. But drama eludes his narrative, which is part chronology, part inverted pyramid. Although Gypsy gives the story a human face, he never becomes a compelling character. "You know that area where the extreme left wing and the extreme right wing come together in that don't-tread-on-me area?" explained a friend. "He was right there."

Born and bred in a Houston suburb, Gypsy's life followed a painfully unremarkable trajectory of parental divorce, strip malls and a half-hearted stab at community college. That is until his girlfriend convinced him to visit California and its famed redwoods. When Gypsy joined a troop of mostly longhaired, anarchist, unemployed and out-of-state Earth First!ers in 1997, they stood between the tree and the saw. And between hard-working rural residents and a vanishing way of life.

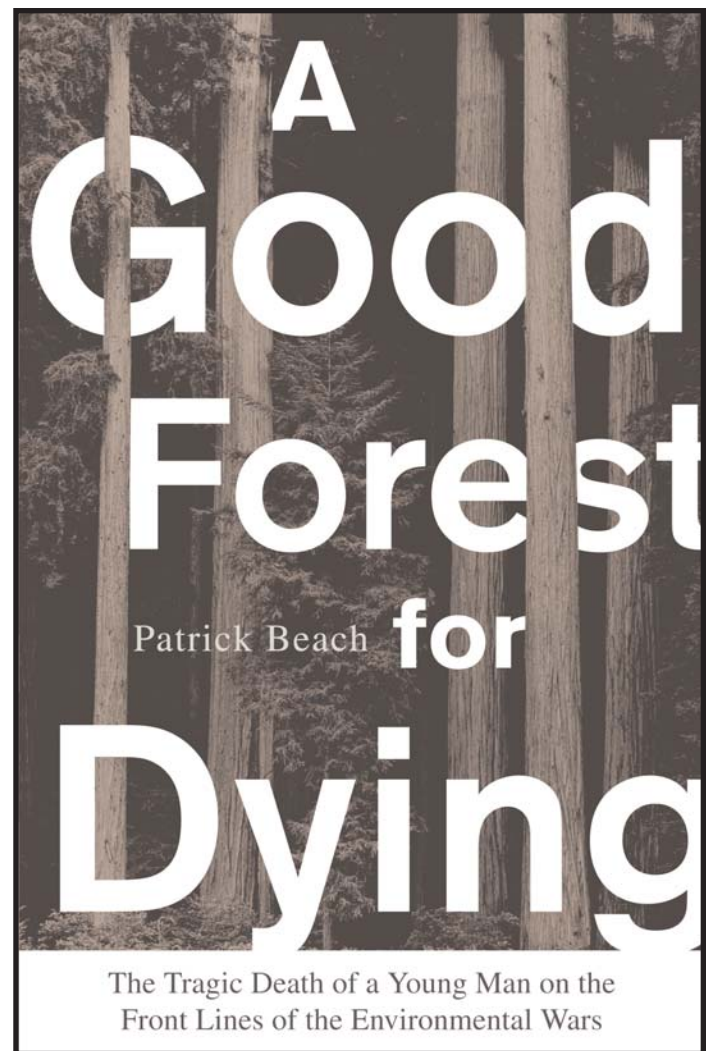
"Jacking around with a person's livelihood," writes Beach, "is a great way to draw a ferocious response anywhere, especially in a place where the manly enterprise of timber felling is the fuel of the economy."

Direct action and treesits make great photo ops, but they couldn't prevent the so-called bad guys – the raider Hurwitz and his holding corporation, Maxxam – from devising a plan that would trash Humboldt in order to pay off the infamous junk bond investors, Michael Milliken and Ivan Boesky. Maxxam's strategy to quickly liquidate the company's holdings – the largest redwood groves still in private hands – transformed Pacific Lumber. Once its biggest employer, builder of schools and hospitals, and model for sustainable commercial forestry, the company nearly destroyed Humboldt.

On Sept. 17, 1998, contract logger A.E. Ammons left his trailer and went to work in the forest where a bunch of hippies challenged him to walk away from his only paycheck. This often happened. But the hippies usually took off once the trees started

falling, and Ammons enjoyed scaring them. But on the twentieth felling of the afternoon, Gypsy didn't get out of the way. The logger and Earth First! wound up in civil court when Gypsy's mother sued Pacific Lumber for wrongful death.

Beach's crucial insight in "A Good Forest for Dying" explains the 1998 public land deal in which state and federal officials paid Pacific Lumber \$480 million (over half of what Hurwitz paid for the entire company) for 7,500 acres of old-growth redwood forest at the source of the Eel River. In the so-called Headwaters Deal, Hurwitz shrewdly manipulated the Earth



First! treesitters and protesters to push up the price of the lumber, Beach concludes. By laying off local loggers and pocketing the cash, Hurwitz made more by selling the land to the government than he could have by logging it.

As Beach suggests, readers should refer to David Harris's 1996 book "The Last Stand." That book is a more entertaining history of the Pacific Lumber-Earth First! timber war. Harris details the involvement of junk bond investors in both the Pacific

(Continued next page)

Lumber takeover and the 1980s savings and loan debacle, which cost American taxpayers billions of dollars. Harris also chronicles Earth First! from its intellectual origins in Edward Abbey's "The Monkey Wrench Gang" to the various personalities and paranoia of its members. He ends his tale with the still-unsolved car bombing of Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney in Oakland during 1990's Redwood Summer.

Nearly all of the remaining ancient redwoods – less than 5 percent of the old growth that existed before industrial logging – remain protected in California parks, with more in Humboldt than anywhere else. But the Bush Administration's broad rejection of the Clinton roadless rule and re-interpretation of the Northwest Forest Plan threaten forest and river restoration projects under way throughout the Pacific Northwest. The bigger story is only beginning.

*California freelancer Jim Rossi can be reached at jim\_rossi02@yahoo.com*



## Climate shock, worldwide

**FEELING THE HEAT: DISPATCHES FROM THE FRONTLINES OF CLIMATE CHANGE**

**By Jim Motavalli, Sally Deneen, Ross Gelbspan, David Helvarg, Mark Hertsgaard, Orna Izakson, Kieran Mulvaney, Dick Russell, Colin Woodard and Gary Braasch. Routledge, \$17.95**

**By YERETH ROSEN**

A few years ago, pollster and political consultant Frank Luntz advised Republicans to soften their image as the anti-environment party with some semantic changes. For example, instead of referring to "global warming" they should use the more benign-sounding expression "climate change."

After reading this book, I think Luntz may have been onto something, but not for the reason that he probably thought. To sum up, the buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is causing such varied effects that "global warming" hardly does justice to them. Maybe a more accurate term is "climate shock."

Hurricanes pound the islands of the Caribbean more frequently. Snow has been replaced by rain in many mountainous regions. And clouds of particulate smog blocking out sunlight have actually caused some cooling in south Asia.

"Feeling the Heat," a collection of articles compiled by the editors of *E/The Environmental Magazine*, travels the globe to

describe these varied effects. Its chapters describe the impacts (and suspected impacts) of global warming on far-flung geographies, from atolls of the South Pacific to the varied climates of Manhattan, Alaska and Antarctica.

The journalists generally refrain from pitting good-hearted environmentalists against evil polluters. The opening chapter on China, for example, describes the nation's crippling, historic poverty and launches a particularly compelling pro-development argument. Development will bring advanced and cleaner technology to China, where some people are so poor that they do what they have to do – like burn dirty coal – just to survive.

The first half of the book deals with the human and economic toll of global warming, giving some important attention to impacts long neglected by journalists, perhaps because the scientific explanation and evidence tend to be too technical and mind-numbing for mass consumption.

Here are some of those current and future costs:

- In Fiji, nighttime temperatures are higher than they used to be with the side effect that the sugar cane crop's sucrose content has been reduced.
- In the Pacific Northwest, salmon are dying off because of warmer water.
- The cost to New York City's developed-to-the-hilt waterfront from rising sea levels and more frequent storms promises to be staggering.

The second half of "Feeling the Heat" emphasizes ecological impacts and some non-economic human impacts, such as those which threaten traditional Alaska Native cultures.

I cover warming-climate issues in Alaska, so the chapter on Alaska and the western Arctic was of particular interest to me.

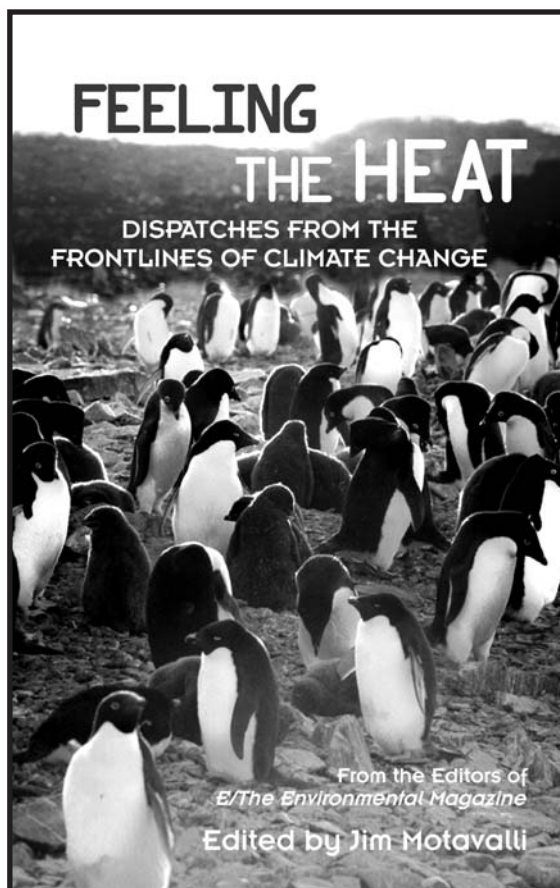
Alaska is often referred to as the canary in the coal mine as regards global warming, because even an incremental rise in temperatures can have a profound effect. It can mean the difference between ice and water, or permafrost and mud. I learned from the book that experts all around the world are also claiming coal-mine-canary status for their regions.

Longtime Greenpeace activist Kieran Mulvaney's chapter on Alaska is a good synopsis of the problems emerging here, from the eroding Arctic coastline to the changing boreal forest. Reporters who want to write about the Alaska issues can gather plenty of useful background information and resources from his synopsis.

Global warming, as the book points out, is combining with other, non-climate factors to change environments.

For example, warming is just one of the threats to Australia's Great Barrier Reef, also threatened by agricultural and silvercul-

*(Continued next page)*



tural runoff and the possibility of offshore oil development. Overharvesting of parrotfish has resulted in unhealthy amounts of algae in Caribbean coral systems, which are already being pushed to their maximum temperature tolerance.

One notable omission from the book is discussion of sub-Saharan Africa. Some climate scientists believe that global warming is contributing to drought conditions there.

It's not all gloom and doom. The inevitable development of China can be made responsibly. Indeed, there's an argument to be made that development could greatly improve China's environment. Denmark, with its expanded use of alternative energy, is poised soon to cut its emissions of greenhouse gases by 21 percent of the nation's 1990 levels. Caribbean countries and small islands around the world have formed an Alliance of Small Island States. Current research into solar energy and other alternatives that might prove useful on a larger scale.

Another personal note: I read this book just after giving birth to my second child. With a newborn baby in my arms and a preschooler running around, I had plenty of distractions, to say the least. I would not have been able to focus on this book if it hadn't been readable.

*Yereth Rosen of Anchorage, Alaska, reports for Reuters and the Bureau of National Affairs.*



## Fighting global climate shock

**BOILING POINT: HOW POLITICIANS, BIG OIL AND COAL, JOURNALISTS, AND ACTIVISTS HAVE FUELED THE CLIMATE CRISIS – AND WHAT WE CAN DO TO AVERT DISASTER**

By **Ross Gelbspan**

Basic Books, \$22.00

By **JENNY RABINOWITZ**

"It is an excruciating experience to watch the planet fall apart piece by piece in the face of persistent and pathological denial." Thus opens Ross Gelbspan's preface to "Boiling Point," his second book on global warming and the forces that have relegated it to the backburner of American consciousness.

Gelbspan explains his subject matter lucidly, giving his reader a sense of the dislocations now being experienced by the Earth. But he also gives special attention to the tactics, phoniness, and behind-the-scenes maneuverings by fossil fuel industries on global warming policy. It's enough to make a snake oil salesman blush, but such has defined global warming dialogue in the United States.

Gelbspan sets the stage for his discussion of global warming with a series of snapshots – chapters devoted to the discernable impacts of a heated up world. The snapshots describe the melting

of the polar icecap to the onslaughts of extreme weather, including the devastation of floods in Bangladesh, as well as harvest shortfalls and hunger in parched agricultural lands. When taken as a whole, the snapshots give the reader almost a movie visual of the planet's ecological interconnectedness—and a glimmer of understanding about the scale of transformations unleashed.

Gelbspan's most arched criticisms are directed at the fossil fuels industry and the Bush White House. He pulls no punches in chronicling the fossil fuels industry's efforts to derail genuine climate dialogue. Those efforts he calls "crimes against humanity." The motivation behind the fossil fuels industry's campaign is straightforward: delay the inevitable, he says.

That goal has led some to characterize global warming as fiction and others to muddy the waters with junk science. Greenhouse skeptics relegate the problem to natural atmospheric variation, disassociated from human activity. Finally comes out the assertion

that global warming is beneficial. While many experts have acknowledged that parts of the world could end up with more productive farmland, others will suffer dramatically. Gelbspan calls the huckstering of global warming as beneficial the "privatization of truth."

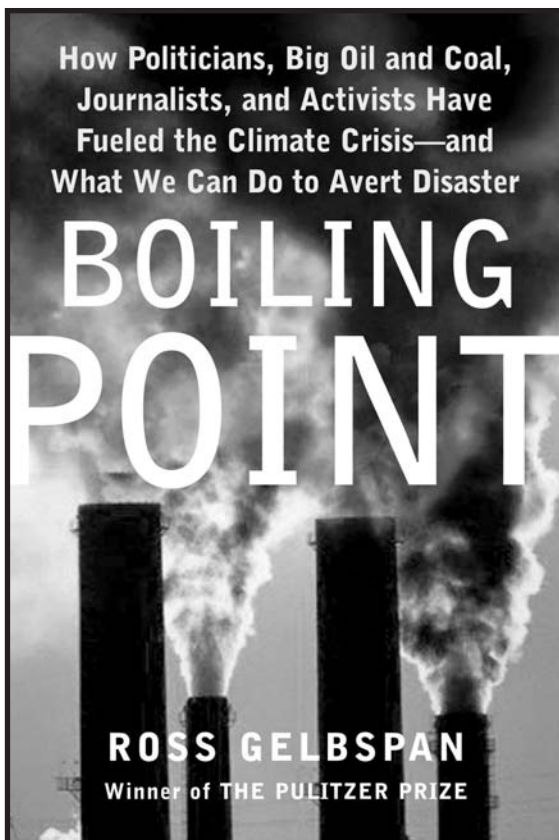
Gelbspan links the fossil fuels industry with the Bush White House – recipient of huge campaign contributions from the oil and gas industry. Gelbspan presents a damning case against Bush's handling of scientific/regulatory matters – from the isolationist precedent set by pulling out of the Kyoto Protocol to his national energy plan, which envisions the building of thousands of carbon-emitting power plants.

Says Gelbspan: "Climate change is the preeminent case study of the contamination of our political system by money." Indeed, the relationship seems more like a Gordian knot – it's hard to know where one begins and the other ends.

So while Rome burns, what is the American press doing? Gelbspan argues that as a result of its predilection for politics, the press gives less to issue-based or long-term coverage, and does not provide continuity in its reporting on global warming. As a consequence, Gelbspan asserts, global warming as both a policy issue and as scientific debate receives disjointed, superficial coverage. The dots are drawn without lines connecting them.

Gelbspan also blames climate change activists for impeding public debate over global warming. He criticizes these activists for adopting an incremental approach and ultimately co-opting into the very system from which they seek real change. But, as

*(Continued next page)*



Gelbspan points out, global warming won't wait: a steep decline – 70 percent – in carbon emissions must be the goal.

Against this disheartening backdrop, Gelbspan suggests several policies to address global warming. The Apollo Project is the creation of a U.S. based coalition of policy experts, environmental organizations and labor groups. It proposes a massive spending commitment of \$300 billion to developing a renewable energy infrastructure in the United States—a modern day New Deal—including high speed rail systems, enhancements to public transportation, and R&D into hybrid and fuel cell technologies. It also calls for an increase in residential concentration, more pedestrian-friendly space and more bike paths.

Another proposal of U.S. origin is Sky Trust, the idea of Peter Barnes, social activist and author of “Who Owns the Sky.” With Sky Trust, the sky is put into a trust to which each American would equally own a share. Those who create emissions beyond a limit determined by Congress would then proportionately pay into the trust, which in turn would pay dividends to each trust holder. Contraction and Convergence, the creation of Britain's Aubrey Meyer, harnesses the mechanisms of the free market on a global scale. Here a global emission limit is determined by international agreement, with developing nations apportioned their share of emissions based on population. As nations equalize in wealth, their share of emissions will eventually balance the more stringent emissions rates on already developed economies.

Gelbspan levels several criticisms of the plans, even as he praises them for their innovative thinking. His main criticism of Sky Trust and the Apollo Project is that they don't include an immediate and steep reduction in carbon emissions on a global scale. In short, they offer too little, too late. The Contraction and Convergence model, while global in scope, inadequately addresses the practical framework needed for a monitoring and enforcement system. But a central strength of Contraction and Convergence, Gelbspan feels, is its recognition and response to the historical inequities of wealth between rich nations and the developing world.

And this, Gelbspan asserts, is global warming's silver lining: that by realizing a complete planetary realignment from fossil fuel-based economies to economies based on renewables –

hydrogen, solar, wind—an opportunity opens to make human civilization as a whole more just, and thus more humane. This can be achieved, says Gelbspan, because renewables are inherently localized systems of energy production and are thus valuable sources of wealth creation.

In spite of the book's ample documentation and level analysis, Gelbspan at times takes his arguments to excess, straying from addressing global warming to a personal utopian daydreaming. For instance, he takes the underlying idea that open, genuine dialogue is essential to a functioning democracy to untenable extremes, such as, “...one could imagine people around the world voting on what is the acceptable discrepancy between the salary of a CEO and a janitor.” And, “people could be given the opportunity to vote on regulations that would limit the most damaging impacts of corporate activities on vulnerable communities, populations, and ecosystems.” It's a great idea, but in a world of six billion and counting, how could any of this be achieved let alone enforced? Such statements are out of line with what otherwise is a practical and uncompromising look at how global warming plays out in day-to-day life.

In the meantime, warming continues unabated. It is predicted that by 2050, a third of the world's species will be extinct. Today 90 percent of the coral reefs in the Indian Ocean have perished, while far away in the North Sea, marine life is in impending collapse. Millions are predicted by the World Health Organization to succumb to climate-related diseases, in a matter of decades. “We're changing the Earth in ways that are just inconceivably large,” says Ransom Myers, a professor of ocean studies at Dalhousie University, quoted in Gelbspan's book.

Gelbspan writes that the fossil fuels industry is on a “collision course” with global warming, and sweeping changes are only a matter of time. No wonder the industry and the government are fighting to maintain the status quo. But as H.R. Haldeman once remarked during Watergate, “Once the toothpaste is out the tube, it is awfully hard to get it back in.” This observation explains the fossil fuels industry's ultimate predicament, as well as our own.

*Jenny Rabinowitz is a Washington, D.C., freelance reporter specializing in energy and toxic waste issues.*

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## GMOs... (from page 8)

Science in the Public Interest. Salient details – sometimes even the name of the chemical being produced – are shielded from public view, CSPI says.

Biotech producers and the government say the current regulatory system, which relies largely on rules that predate the technology, is adequate. The Environmental Protection Agency is in charge of plants containing pesticides. The USDA oversees tests of new varieties in the field. The Food and Drug Administration is to make sure biotech crops are safe to eat.

Trouble is, the FDA relies on a voluntary process. It examines company-prepared summaries of research – not the actual data.

Using the Freedom of Information Act, former EPA scientist Doug Gurian-Sherman reviewed more than a quarter of the 53 “data summaries” presented to the FDA. Gurian-Sherman, now

with CSPI, concluded the review process is inadequate, failing for example to investigate “scientifically recognized toxicants” in tomatoes.

In six of the 14 cases he studied, the government asked the biotech-food developer for more information. But the government received answers in only three cases.

Government and industry assure that biotech foods are safe. And the NAS reports catalogue a “long and diverse” list of potential benefits. Yet, even as super-salmon and other novelties are poised to debut, most Americans still know little about the trend. Now, that's food for thought.

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*Sally Deneen is a Seattle freelancer who has written about GE foods for E: The Environmental Magazine.*

# Federal regs and their loopholes, lead pollution

By MIKE DUNNE

The Bush administration's environmental record may not be a boiling topic in the 2004 presidential campaign, but reviews of what has happened under George W. Bush highlighted some of the better environmental journalism over the summer.

*The Washington Post* ran a series of stories by various reporters about how the Bush administration has used the distraction of terrorism to quietly change regulations while *The New York Times* also looked at the same issue. The Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*, along with Knight-Ridder News Service, reported on the lack of refineries inspections while those facilities remain a key polluter in the communities where they are located.

The *Post* series began Sunday, Aug 15 with a story by Amy Goldstein and Sarah Cohen on how the demise of a decade-old plan to fight tuberculosis illustrated how the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has become more business friendly.

The second part, by Rick Weiss, outlined how a lobbyist made a last-minute change to a bill that created a tool to attack the science behind new regulations, called the "Data Quality" law. The law opened the door for the makers of atrazine to continue selling the weed killer despite fresh science that was questioning the herbicide's impact on aquatic life, especially amphibians. This could have big implications for environmental reporters.

The third part, by Joby Warwick, showed how just a small change in the regulations allowed coal companies to continue stripping the tops off of mountains.

"Thousands of tons of rocky debris were dumped into valleys, permanently burying more than 700 miles of mountain streams. By 1999, concerns over the damage to waterways triggered a backlash of lawsuits and court rulings that slowed the industry's growth to a trickle," Warwick wrote.

But under a new administration, business seems to be back to the usual.

On Aug. 14, Joel Brinkley of *The New York Times* wrote that the Bush administration, while the country is focused on terrorism and the war in Iraq, has quietly used changes in regulations – rather than the more high-profile amendments to federal laws – to reduce government oversight, generally to the benefit of the business community.

"Health rules, environmental regula-

The Bush administration said "consent decrees," or legal suit settlements, were resolving pollution violations and problems. However, an Environmental Protection Agency inspector general's report said that the agency is making almost no effort to ensure refiners are complying with the decrees they are signing.

The reporters used examples of refineries around the country where consent decrees have resulted in more pollution, not less, like a Motiva Refinery in



Photo courtesy of MIKE DUNNE

**The Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* reported recently that refineries, often the top polluters in a community, are rarely inspected by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. One such plant is this ExxonMobil Refinery in Baton Rouge, La., which released 1.125 million pounds of air pollutants in 2002. Of that amount, more than half, or 711,000 pounds of pollutants came from "fugitive" emissions, or leaks and accidental releases.**

tions, energy initiative, work safety standards and product safety disclosure policies have been modified in ways that often please business and industry leaders while dismaying interest groups representing consumers, workers, drivers, medical patients, the elderly and others," Brinkley wrote.

Among those putting the spotlight on less regulation under the current administration was the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* and Knight Ridder News Service. The series of stories written by the *Star-Telegram*'s Scott Streater and Jeff Claasen with Knight-Ridder's Seth Borenstein, documented how inspection, enforcement actions and other regulatory activity were all down when it comes to one of the nation's top polluting sectors, oil refineries. (Also see Bites and Bytes on page 10).

Port Arthur, Texas. There, officials agreed in March 2001 to millions of dollars of pollution control work but in 2002 it released more toxic fumes than in 2001. It also had not been inspected since 2001.

The series also looks at the issue of "fugitive emissions," those coming from leaks and accidents or processing problems that are then burned off in "flaring." A Chalmette, La., refinery exceeded its permitted discharge by 3 million pounds of pollution caused by equipment failures.

Stories about lead continued to pop up around the country.

The staff of *The Washington Post* continued to cover a long-running story on lead in the drinking water supply in that city. On May 21, D'Vera Cohn reported

(Continued next page)

lead levels in D.C. drinking water fell significantly after the city's water treatment plants switched to chlorine for annual pipe-flushing this spring, providing the first concrete evidence of the cause of excessive lead levels in thousands of homes.

Experts have wondered for months whether the city's lead problem could be blamed on a change in disinfectants from chlorine to chloramines in 2000. Lead levels in household tests exceeded the federal standard in 2002 and have continued to do so.

The treatment plants stopped using chlorine because it creates byproducts that are linked to cancer with chronic exposure. Water experts say further study is needed before they decide whether chlorine will play a role in solving the city's lead problem.

From April 2 to May 8, utility officials switched back to chlorine, a yearly change intended to rinse bacteria from the pipes before summer. During that time, officials said, lead level test results in homes with lead service lines were 25 percent to 30 percent lower than they would have predicted.

Robert McClure of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* wrote June 5 that when today's high school seniors were born, President Ronald Reagan signed a law ordering public drinking-water systems to reduce lead, a toxic metal once used in plumbing that interferes with children's learning skills.

"It took Seattle officials 18 years to be able to say it, but they're about to announce that the city's water system, which also serves much of the Eastside, finally meets the federal health standard. The deadline was 1997," McClure wrote.

That was just one of several stories written on lead in drinking water in the Seattle area by both the *Seattle Times* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

Joan Lowy of Scripps Howard News Service wrote June 30 about a study that possibly links lead poisoning with an upswing in violent crime. Economic consultant Rick Nevin, hired by the Department of Housing and Urban Development to do a cost-benefit analysis of removing lead paint from public housing, said he was stunned to discover a strong relationship between the use of leaded gasoline and violent crime.

The post-World War II use of leaded gasoline, which peaked in the 1970s, made

lead poisoning virtually ubiquitous. Nearly 80 percent of children had lead levels in their blood that would exceed today's safety threshold of 10 micrograms per deciliter.

The problem was especially severe for inner city children who were not only breathing lead from auto exhausts, but also living in older housing contaminated with lead-based paint. Studies at the time showed that black 2-year-olds in New York City and Chicago had average lead levels over 30 micrograms.

Nevin, senior vice president of ICF Consulting in Fairfax, Va., found that violent crime of all kinds increased as lead pollution increased. Murder, rape and aggravated assault unexpectedly began to decline in the early- to mid-1990s, the same time that children who benefited from decreasing use of leaded gasoline were reaching their teens, he said.

Similar trends can be seen in Great Britain, Australia, France, New Zealand and other countries, Nevin said.

On July 10, Tim Bonfield of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* wrote that the standard treatment for childhood lead poisoning – a medication called succimer – does not reduce learning disabilities caused by lead exposure, according to a large study led by researchers in Cincinnati. And because the medication isn't a cure, researchers say efforts to prevent lead poisoning by cleaning up old, poorly kept housing need to be expanded.

The study – published in the July issue of *Pediatrics* – tracked 647 children in Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Newark, N.J. All had significant amounts of lead in their blood, enough to damage learning ability, memory, attention span and self-control. At higher levels, lead poisoning causes more severe, sometimes fatal, brain damage.

The chemical industry as terrorist target continued to make some news.

Aiden Lewis of *The Associated Press* reported June 10 that an Italian prosecutor said he had provided U.S. authorities with transcripts of phone calls between terror suspects, including one transcript that reportedly refers to a woman ready to carry out a chemical attack in the United States. In one of the intercepted conversations, a terrorist arrested in connection with Madrid train-bombings refers to a woman ready to carry out a chemical attack in the United States

Charlie Savage of *The Boston Globe* wrote June 2 that Department of Homeland Security officials are worried about concentrated large stores of chemicals that they call "prepositioned weapons of mass destruction" near densely populated areas, as well as railroad cars that transport those chemicals.

There are more than 100 chemical facilities where an accident would put more than a million people at risk, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. One is in Boston: A chemical distributor acknowledged in its filing that in a worst-case scenario if a tank holding 180,000 pounds of vinyl acetate – a highly flammable liquid – ruptured, it would send a 4.9-mile-long toxic cloud through the city.

Also along the terrorism front, Martin Leingang of the *The Enquirer* in Cincinnati wrote in June that 14 hospitals in greater Cincinnati soon will link to a computer system that tracks the symptoms of every patient who comes into their emergency rooms, searching for similarities that might signal a bioterrorism attack.

The early-warning system is part of a national effort to respond as quickly as possible to episodes of biological or chemical poisoning. Federal officials have said al-Qaida is plotting a terrorist attack in the United States. Area health departments are providing \$11,000 for the connection.

Mark S. Reisch of *Chemical and Engineering News* wrote June 7 about the approaching 20th anniversary of the chemical accident in Bhopal, India. More than 3,800 people died within days of a Union Carbide plant leak and thousands more were injured.

The accident ushered in new U.S. regulations and Reisch wrote about questions concerning how American companies are handling hazardous chemicals today.

Union Carbide officials vowed they would do all they could to ensure that such a disaster never happened again. Part of the effort became known as the Responsible Care program. Industry leaders say they have taken their best shot at staving off accidents, but critics insist they have not done enough.

Jim Bruggers of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* wrote Sept. 5 that the departments of Homeland Security and Transportation have placed a public notice in the federal register to look at taking

(Continued next page)

warning placards off of tank cars, trucks and other carriers of toxic chemicals as a safeguard against the cargo being used by terrorists. Bruggers quoted some firefighter groups as opposed to the plan because accident responders rely on the placards to tell them what specific chemicals they are dealing with and how to minimize their impact.

Such accidents do happen, as the *Austin American-Statesman's* Asher Price showed in a June 30 story. A cloud of chlorine gas, released after a train wreck just southwest of San Antonio, killed three people and injured dozens of others before it dissipated over Central Texas. With major rail lines cutting through Austin and Central Texas, the transportation of such chemicals locally is common. But accidents such as the San Antonio one are rare, industry officials and regulators say.

"In the county I cannot recall a hazardous materials rail accident since I've been here," said Pete Baldwin, who has been Travis County's emergency management coordinator since 1991.

Pollution from the home continues to be a good topic.

Greg Harman of the *Biloxi Sun Herald* in Mississippi wrote June 2 about antidepressant chemicals, antibiotics, hormones from birth control pills, even chemotherapy drugs are finding their way back into water supplies.

As part of a senior project, Moss Point, Miss., resident Anna Jordan tested treated wastewater at 10 treatment plants in Jackson and Harrison counties. Testing specifically for caffeine and estrogen, Jordan's samples, many of which she said were supplied directly by plant officials, all came back positive from a Jackson lab.

Though the presence is minute, measured in parts per billion, it is still distressing, she said. "Just the fact that it's still there is kind of a problem." How much of a problem, however, is unclear.

Harman pointed to an article in *Environmental Health Perspectives* in 2002 that said the amount of pharmaceuticals released into the environment annually is equal to the amount of pesticides used nationally every year. But several published studies have stressed the unknowns of the potential human health effects.

On June 12, Janet Raloff of *Science News* wrote about a series of studies in recent years that chronicled a disturbing

trend: Children are maturing sexually much earlier. Though no one has conclusively tied precocious puberty to a particular dietary, environmental, or medical factor, suspicions abound that it stems from exposure to hormone-like agents in the environment.

The latest study supports the idea certain environmental factors can modify the timing of puberty — if the exposures to them occur in the womb. For women concerned about diminishing the likelihood that they'll trigger such a phenomenon in their own daughters, a cup of tea might be called for — on a regular basis.

Gayle C. Windham and her colleagues at the California Department of Health Services and at a La Jolla, Calif., consulting firm report that the age of menarche — when a girl first starts her monthly menstrual periods — is later among daughters of tea drinkers than among daughters of moms who typically choose coffee or another beverage. If confirmed, the findings may reflect "hormonal effects," the researchers say.

Jane Kay of the *San Francisco Chronicle* also pointed out how unsafe one might be at home in a May 19 story. "Frying chicken at the stove, spraying ants with insecticide, taking a hot shower, plugging in a room freshener, or subsidizing the rug with detergent — all these release chemicals that swirl around rooms like invisible dust devils," Kay wrote.

Household products, furnishings and cosmetics release vapors and particles that people can inhale or absorb through the skin. The nation's best researchers on indoor air pollution say levels in house are many times higher than those from the outdoors. In some cases, levels in homes would trigger workplace inspections, she said.

Martin Mittelstaedt of the *Toronto Globe and Mail* wrote in late May that a comprehensive survey of more than 1,300 Americans has found traces of weed- and bug-killers in the bodies of everyone tested, leading environmentalists in both Canada and the United States to call for far tighter controls on pesticides.

The survey, conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that the body of the average American contained 13 of these chemicals.

A surprising finding was that 99 per cent of Americans, including virtually all children born in recent years, had DDT

residues. The use of the insecticide has been subject to controls and outright bans since the late 1960s, and its presence indicates how persistent it is in the general environment.

On June 4, Meredith Goad of the *Portland (Maine) Press-Herald* was one of several reporters to write June stories about the pervasiveness of flame retardants in the environment. Dust samples swiped from computers in Maine's State House contain the same toxic flame retardants that legislators banned earlier this year, she wrote.

Flame retardants are chemicals that have been widely used for years in electronics, furniture and other consumer products as a fire-safety measure. But now there is concern that the chemicals are accumulating in the environment and may be neurological and reproductive hazards.

Maine legislators passed a bill this year banning two types of flame retardants in consumer products by 2006. A third will be banned in 2008 if safer alternatives are available by then.

The dust samples from the State House in Augusta were part of an eight-state study released by Clean Production Action and the Computer Take Back Campaign, two national organizations that promote clean production policies that protect the environment and public health.

On June 9, Alan Scher Zagier of the *Naples News*, carried by Scripps Howard News Service, wrote about the hazards of human exposure to the popular wood preservative known as creosote — from skin rashes to lung cancer — are well known to government regulators and scientists.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency recognized creosote's perils in 1978, announcing its intention to phase out the coal-derived preservative's required registration. That was more than 200 years after London physician Percival Pott's ground-breaking discovery of high cancer rates among British men who cleaned soot from chimneys.

Yet despite those well-documented risks, coal-tar creosote has been a timber industry staple for the past century. Each year, 825 million pounds of creosote are used to protect telephone poles, marine pilings and most of the nation's countless miles of railroad ties from wood-boring pests and foul weather, according to industry estimates.

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## The Beat... (from page 35)

When mishandled, it seeps into soil and groundwater. Its fumes permeate the largely poor and rural neighborhoods surrounding wood treatment plants. And its toxic chemical cocktail leaves behind a legacy of suspicious illnesses and premature deaths.

*Grand Island Independent's* Tracy Overstreet reported June 6 that as few as five 50-gallon barrels of industrial solvent could have caused the miles-long contamination plume now plaguing southwest Grand Island.

Levels of 1,1-dichloroethylene and tetrachloroethylene, commonly used industrial solvents, have been found at levels 28 times the drinking water standard – enough for health officials to advise residents in the three subdivisions to not drink or bathe in the private well water. City water lines have since been extended to reduce negative health

impacts, Overstreet wrote.

But health impacts may still be seen. One official estimated that homeowners in those subdivisions may have been drinking contaminated water “for 20 years” from their untested private wells before contamination levels discovered in city wells upstream alerted officials to a problem.

On June 10, Ian Ith of the *Seattle Times* wrote about how the cleanup of badly polluted Duwamish River spread plumes of toxic PCBs, exceeding pollution standards in some places.

For watchdogs of the Superfund cleanup of the river, a King County report confirmed their long-standing contentions that the county needs to change its haphazard methods of scooping out the toxic sediment. “They used the sloppiest technology available, with unskilled operators,” said B.J. Cummings, who heads the Duwamish

River Cleanup Coalition. “The sediment they were dredging went all over the place.”

On Aug 8, *The New York Times's* Amy Cortese wrote one of many articles about DuPont and its Teflon. She said EPA filed a complaint against the company charging the company with withholding evidence of its own health and environmental concerns about an important chemical used to manufacture Teflon. That would be a violation of federal environmental law, compounded by the possibility that DuPont covered up the evidence for two decades. DuPont contends that it met its legal reporting obligations. The company could face potential fines of up to \$300 million.

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