

SEJ Journal

The Quarterly Publication of the Society of Environmental Journalists

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The value of CAR

When a regulator says 'Don't worry,' check it out

By MICHAEL O'DONNELL

In 1998, Ron Nixon set out to investigate clearcut logging in the mountains of Virginia.

Nixon, then a reporter for the *Roanoke Times*, asked the state's Department of Forestry about violations of environmental regulations that would leave steep terrain vulnerable to landslides, erosion and flooding.

The department's top officials told Nixon that the timber industry had few problems and that 90 percent of companies operating in Virginia complied with the department's "best management" logging guidelines.

But an off-hand comment at a Department of Forestry briefing set Nixon off in another direction.

"I was just talking to one of their people and they mentioned, 'Oh, we have this audit,' Nixon says.

Besides his interest in the environment, Nixon was deeply involved with using computer technology to access and analyze public records. Armed with a fast Internet connection and a powerful desktop computer, Nixon downloaded the department's data on audits of logging sites and crunched the numbers himself.

"And the audits would find numerous problems," Nixon says, problems that the agency never reported publicly, although the information was in the public record.

Nixon's analysis of department records became the basis for a series of seven articles he and colleague Mike Hudson wrote for the *Roanoke Times* over three days in November 1998. Among other things, they found that 92 percent of logging sites audited at random in 1997 *failed* at least one of the department's "best management" guidelines, and 14 percent of the sites had water-quality problems.

For Ron Nixon, the coming together of abundant data and muscular computers is a source of fascination. It's also how he makes his living as the computer-assisted reporting editor for the *Star Tribune* newspaper of Minneapolis.

Nixon also has served as training director for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting, a joint program of Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc. (www.ire.org) and the Missouri School of Journalism. Through NICAR, Nixon has led training sessions on computer-assisted reporting throughout the country.

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Inside Story:

It's best to trust the numbers, not the politicians

By MIKE DUNNE

How many times have you heard that the Bush Administration is soft on enforcement?

Well, Knight-Ridder's Seth Borenstein gathered 15 years of enforcement statistics from the Environmental Protection Agency and analyzed them. The answer: George Bush, the father of the incumbent, has been the most stringent enforcer of environmental law in the last three administrations, but George W. is soft on environmental enforcement compared to his two predecessors, one Democrat and one Republican.

The Washington, D.C.-based Borenstein loves numbers and his use of them proved what many often said, but could not document.

"This is a city of spin, but numbers give you a sense of trust that rhetoric does not," Borenstein said.

In his story, which ran Dec. 6 in newspapers around the country, Borenstein reported:

"Violation notices against polluters are the most important enforcement tool, experts say, and they've had the biggest drop

under the current President Bush. The monthly average of violation notices since January 2001 has dropped 58 percent compared with the Clinton administration's monthly average.

"Those pollution citations dropped 12 percent from 2001 to 2002, and another 35 percent from 2002 through the first 10 months of 2003.

"Punishing polluters — by fines or referrals for prosecution — has dropped as well, but not as dramatically. Administrative fines since January 2001 are down 28 percent, when adjusted for inflation, from Clinton administration levels. Civil penalties average 6 percent less, when adjusted for inflation. And the number of cases referred to the Justice Department for prosecution is down 5 percent," Borenstein wrote.

The numbers make it hard to spin a positive story for the current administration. But, as you can see in our Inside Story, that didn't stop EPA from trying to soften the blow expected from Borenstein's work.

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SEJ ramps up fight against curbs on public data

By DAN FAGIN

In college, I remember hearing a history professor say — or mutter, actually, since he was a very ancient history professor — that every society has its exemplars. They are the people everyone tries to emulate, and who come to personify the highest aspirations of the group.

I was thinking about that the other day as a group of us were brainstorming via e-mail about how best to ramp up the efforts of our society — the Society of Environmental Journalists — in protecting public access to environmental information. Thanks to a new grant from the Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation, we have an exciting new opportunity to do great work in this field, which is why we were brainstorming — and why we're looking for new ideas and energy from you, too.

Ken Ward Jr. of the *Charleston Gazette*, who chairs SEJ's First Amendment Task Force, chimed in with an e-mail explaining why he thinks it's so important that we emphasize training reporters in how to request information under the federal Freedom of Information Act.

"Personally," he wrote, "I don't think I've done my job if a week goes by and I haven't filed a FOIA."

Now *that*, in my opinion, is exemplary behavior. I apologize for putting Ken on the spot like this (he won't like it because he's a very unassuming guy), but in one simple sentence, Ken has set the bar for the rest of us. We're *not doing our jobs*, at least not as well as we could, unless we use *all* of the tools at our disposal to get important information to the public.

Joe Davis, a veteran Washington-based freelancer and part-time SEJ staffer who is involved in many of SEJ's FOI activities, picked up on this, too. "I was awfully inspired to hear Ken Ward say that," Davis told me. "Even if it's Friday afternoon and he's tired, he still tries to file a quick FOIA request. Because of that, Ken gets all kinds of great stories that no one else has."

Getting great stories is the most obvious reason to use FOIA, but it's not the only one. By now, everyone reading this column surely knows that a core principle of journalism and of democracy — the people's right to know what the government knows — is under unprecedented attack at all levels of government in the wake of the terrorism of Sept. 11, 2001. The information crack-down affects much more than just environmental reporting, but the data we use on this beat has been a high-profile target. Citing concerns about abetting terrorists, agencies are moving to restrict or eliminate access to many types of information, from disaster scenario plans to pipeline routes. There's anecdotal evidence that FOI requests are being delayed and denied at disturbing rates, and that public agencies are increasingly making important decisions behind closed doors, without public input. In many cases, of course, those agencies are being cheered on by private businesses or groups that never wanted the information released in the first place. Public scrutiny can be so darn inconvenient.

For individual journalists, and for groups like SEJ, the crack-down poses a fundamental choice: We can ignore it, or we can engage.

By engaging, I don't mean taking political action to try to set environmental policy. That's something SEJ will never do. Nor do I mean reflexively protesting every proposed access restriction that comes down the pike. Nuclear power plants and chemical facilities *are* possible terrorist targets, and almost everyone understands that some restrictions make sense.

Instead, what I mean by engaging is asserting ourselves as journalists, individually and as a group. That means following Ken's example by regularly filing FOI requests — not just to get good stories, but also to demonstrate to agencies and politicians that the Freedom of Information Act is worth preserving. And for groups like SEJ, engaging means publicizing and protesting unwarranted efforts to stifle public access, so policymakers know that the press — the people's representative — is watching.

It's an uphill battle, to be sure. Reporters lead such busy lives that it's hard to find the time to file FOIA requests or volunteer with groups like SEJ. Politicians, meanwhile, seem to believe they can restrict access without risking public backlash because voters are still worried about future attacks. Plus, there's the inescapable fact that journalists will always be uncomfortable taking collective action. We tend to feel awkward about taking any kind of a stand — even if, in doing so, we're only trying to preserve the tools we need to do our jobs well.

Fortunately, at SEJ we have some not-so-secret weapons in our arsenal, and we are forging ahead.

Thanks to the generosity and farsightedness of the McCormick Tribune Foundation, which recently gave SEJ a \$50,000 grant, and to ongoing support from the Rockefeller Family Fund, which gave us \$25,000 last year, we now have significant resources specifically targeted for access-related efforts. We also have terrific volunteer support, thanks to the "godfather" of SEJ's FOI program, former SEJ President Jim Bruggers of the (Louisville) *Courier-Journal*, and his colleagues on the First Amendment Task Force, including Ward and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer's* Robert McClure, who is the SEJ board's liaison to the task force.

Perhaps most importantly, we also have the amazingly energetic Joe Davis, who brings to SEJ a passionate belief in open government and an encyclopedic knowledge of environmental policy. A Harvard graduate with a Ph.D. in English, Joe worked as an energy and environmental reporter at *Congressional Quarterly* and has freelanced for a variety of publications, including the *Environment Writer* newsletter, to which he still contributes. SEJ members know him best as an articulate poster to the SEJ-talk listserv and as the editor of *TipSheet*, the biweekly e-

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Report from the Society's President



By
Dan
Fagin

SEJournal

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The Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) is a non-profit, tax exempt, 501(c)3 organization. The mission of the organization is to advance public understanding of environmental issues by improving the quality, accuracy and visibility of environmental reporting. We envision an informed society through excellence in environmental journalism. As a network of journalists and academics, SEJ offers national and regional conferences, publications and online services. SEJ's membership of more than 1,300 includes journalists working for print and electronic media, educators, and students. Non-members are welcome to attend SEJ's national conferences and to subscribe to the quarterly SEJournal.

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Summer '04.....	May 1, 2004
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SEJ adopts party line in New Orleans

By DAVID “The Dude” HELVARG

I fly into the Big Easy for a few days of Party Hearty and get to this totally sick hotel right on Bourbon and Canal. I mean it’s like you’re on Chronic 24/7 and everyone’s got the munchies. So I’m about to dig into a bowl of BBQ Shrimp which is really butter/sugar shrimp when suddenly this gomer starts talking about bycatch. He says how they kill and toss 10 pounds of fish for every pound of shrimp they net and I scope out this killjoy and he’s wearing one of those convention badges that says SEJ, like

Turns out they’re having a convention of environmental journalists at my hotel. So I figure, Whoa, maybe these are dudes I can chill with and I sign on.

what? Sick Elephant Janitors? Turns out they’re having a convention of environmental journalists at my hotel. They tell me they’re going to be studying hurricanes, though I prefer hand-grenades, and also Formosa Termites, which I admit is a drink I’ve not heard of, but sounds potent. So I figure, Whoa, maybe these are dudes I can chill with and I sign on.

First thing they do is start playing dulcimer music and handing out some sort of

Pulitzers for Pollution. This guy Mark is also pitching butt paste which I guess is something reporters use to smooth over differences with their editors. Day one includes paddle tours for those who want to get totally polluted, an oyster tour for both straights and bi-valves, and a disappearing bayou show that included infestations of egrets. A guy from Shell oil complains about how their pipelines are being damaged by storms and rising tides which is kind of like the Boston Archdiocese complaining that children aren’t as trusting as they used to be. Others took a trip up “Cancer Alley,” only these dudes at this chemical plant uninvited them at the last minute because they just then realized that September 11th is the same day as 9/11 and maybe didn’t want all those reporters seeing all the security that wasn’t there.

Dr. Bob from Loyola (Latin for “Jesuit Party School”) led a nature tour of Bourbon Street where the animals totally rule. He also assured anyone interested that his being a herpetologist had nothing to do with herpes.

Conference panels included the head of the forest service talking about turning forests into grasslands and one on TV weathermen as environmental sources, “and the long-term forecast includes droughts, flooding, famine, and sea-level rise, so better bring the cat in tonight...”

I planned on attending the bio-terrorism attack scenario but woke up paralyzed, realizing that a real chemical attack had occurred. Apparently someone slipped something into one of my five drinks the night before. Inspired by investigative journalists like Dan X who’d gone undercover as a bartender that night, I vowed to return to the various pubs I’d visited to find the terrorist responsible.

When I finally got back to the conference I could see someone had dosed the whole crew with some sort of paranoia-induc-

ing juju. People were mumbling about all sorts of really scary stuff like lead and metal poisoning, hormonal pollutants, dengue fever and the genetic engineering of hyper-aggressive beavers to create the Army Corps of Engineers. This was followed by a nostalgia-laced, Soviet-style SEJ election in which seven candidates gave speeches for seven positions which members then got to vote on. At one point a dissident grabbed the mike and began shouting that a free-market (i.e. corporate-subsidized) think tank had used part of its panel’s shouting time to accuse SEJ of being communistic. Luckily, SEJ’s comrade president quickly restored order and the membership meeting returned to its traditional state of lethargy, kind of like a slowly subsiding Louisiana swamp — only less productive.

The Elephant Janitors then repaired to various hospitality suites to learn about a diverse range of issues such as whether wild salmon spring rolls go better with beer or vodka. The Beat Dinners were a new and interesting addition to the SEJ conference, with a range of topics including how to balance family, career and alcohol poisoning while consuming more cholesterol than your average Burger King loading dock. Certainly the conferees gained an informed appreciation of Louisiana’s vast range of marine, intertidal and terrestrial biodiversity by eating it.

While not a blur, Saturday did seem to go by rather quickly with talk about environmental coverage (although if you want the beads, try uncoverage). There was also something about the Governor of Utah becoming head of EPA. Hell dude, I figure if he’s able to protect baked deserts full of scorpions and polygamists, and a watery saltpan full of brine shrimp and black flies, the man’s qualified to protect the rest of the environment. This one guy from the nation’s top air-polluter, Anaconda, seemed to agree (although the large snake I think was curled up on the chair next to me kept hissing ‘he’s got nothing to do with us’). Actually, he was a well-spoken sort of human with the kind of dry self-deprecating humor that could make an asthmatic hack appreciatively. There was also some stuff about depleted fish (too much spawning, dude) and muscular zebras and cuckolded woodpeckers and how reporters can avoid high-risk situations (remember, one feather’s erotic, the whole woodpecker’s perverse).

The week peaked Saturday night at the Bacchanalian Mardi Gras World, which can be reached by forced march, sweltering ferry prison and suicide charge down a muddy hillside. Of course it was worth it in a ‘look at all the giant heads and I’m not even stoned’ sort of way. The Sick Elephant Janitors rocked out in ecstatic incandescence until 10 p.m. when the band pulled the plug because the babysitters had a soccer game in the morning.

Dude, I didn’t know reporters could cut loose like that. If they can be so wild in a quiet backwater town like New Orleans, imagine how totally rad they’ll get next year when they land in a bad-ass party town like Pittsburgh.

David Helvarg is an author and ocean activist who, during his years as a war correspondent, learned how to drink alcohol with the trained professionals of the IRA.

New SEJ endowment aimed to secure group's future

By JAMES BRUGGERS

The SEJ board took a positive step toward securing its future in January when it approved endowment fundraising guidelines for its 21st Century Fund.

A 13-0 vote by the board on Jan. 24 will allow the organization to proceed with asking individuals to invest in SEJ's future by making contributions to the fund. The board also established an endowment committee and named its first members.

The purpose of the fund, according to the guidelines, is to "secure the organization's future by providing a vital layer of protection from the uncertainties of year-to-year fund raising for the operating budget."

Income generated from the fund will be used to help pay for core operations as well as special projects deemed by the board to be of great importance to SEJ. It's a way to keep the SEJ office doors open for business in perpetuity.

The board's approval capped four years of research and discussion, and as the immediate past president — and the co-chair of the new endowment committee along with SEJ Treasurer Peter Thomson — I've been involved in those discussions since they began. To be sure, some of the debate has been heated, though collegial, as board members weighed issues of ethics and deployment of SEJ resources.

For me, the issue boils down to this: We know we must try to develop a meaningful endowment for one main reason: So many of us believe so strongly in SEJ's worth to working journalists, who struggle to keep on top of a staggering array of complex issues that need full and fair disclosure in our society. The endowment is the obligation — the gift — of this generation of journalists who cover the environment to the next.

SEJ named its endowment the 21st Century Fund three years ago and began asking its members and friends to contribute to it through an annual appeal and at the annual conference. It currently has a balance of about \$63,000.

"That's still pretty small, but it's grown a lot in the last couple of years," said Thomson.

SEJ leaders now intend to increase their fund-raising efforts for the endowment.

"We want to build an endowment for a simple but profound

reason: because we don't know what the future will bring for SEJ," said President Dan Fagin. "We've had excellent support from our friends in the foundation world, but we also know that support is highly variable. We need to protect ourselves from these swings as best we can."



Fagin said the SEJ board is determined to keep SEJ dues and fees as low as possible and notes that SEJ is just as determined to continue SEJ's tradition of not accepting gifts or grants from advocacy groups, government agencies or non media corporations.

"So where does that leave us? Our best alternative is to build a significant endowment, consisting of gifts from individuals in and out of SEJ who believe in our group and want us to survive and thrive over the long haul."

Thomson wants everyone to know that SEJ will accept no restrictions or conditions on the use of the 21st Century Fund, and that large donors must acknowledge this principle in writing.

The board has also set up a process for evaluating and screening potential contributors, and reserves the right to reject any inappropriate contribution.

No anonymous donations will be allowed. SEJ will compile a list of donors every year and make it available to anyone who asks for it.

"It should be pointed out that the final document which allows us to move ahead with this campaign reflects the results of a long conversation with our membership and other journalism leaders," Thomson said.

For example, the board polled members during its research for SEJ's strategic plan update. It conducted two surveys of journalism leaders and consulted with members of its advisory board. It also sought and followed the advice of Bob Steele, The Nelson Poynter Scholar for Journalism Values at the Poynter Institute and a widely respected authority on journalism ethics.

"I have been impressed with the process that Dan Fagin and the board members used to examine this important and complex issue," Steele told me when I asked him to comment on SEJ's endowment policy.

Board members, he said, "gathered essential information,

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Metcalf Institute environmental reporting fellowships

The Metcalf Institute Environmental Reporting Fellowships are available to two journalists who are interested in learning about basic science and reporting on environment. The fellowships run from June 20, 2004, to March 11, 2005.

A fellowship provides support to attend the Sixth Annual Workshop for Journalists (June 20-25, 2004); four weeks of independent study at the University of Rhode Island Graduate School of Oceanography with science

faculty mentors; and a \$24,750 stipend for 33 weeks to work as a reporter at either NPR-member station WRNI or *The Providence Journal*, both in Providence, R.I., covering environment and some general assignment news. The fellowship does not include compensation for travel.

Applicants must have no less than two years' experience and U.S. citizenship and may include science writers or reporters from any medium. Women and minorities are encouraged to apply.

Applications must be postmarked by April 12, 2004.

Applications are available at <http://www.gso.uri.edu/metcalf> or call (401)874-6211.

Contact Jackleen de La Harpe, Executive Director, Metcalf Institute for Marine & Environmental Reporting, URI Graduate School of Oceanography, Narragansett, RI 02882. Tel: (401) 874-6211; Fax: (401) 874-6486. jack@gso.uri.edu.



Home turf, kudos and books of environmental destruction

By ELIZABETH MCCARTHY

Terry FitzPatrick recently returned to familiar territory after three years abroad, training radio and television journalists in Eastern Europe and Africa. Before becoming a Northwest Public Affairs Network editor in mid-December, he trained Knight International Press fellows and reporters working with the United Nations and U.S. Agency for International Development. The collaborative assignments ranged from depleted uranium contamination in post-war Kosovo to traffic congestion in Kampala, Uganda.

FitzPatrick gained a new appreciation of radio's importance in the developing world "where poverty and illiteracy make newspapers irrelevant for most people."

He was, however, not exactly met with open arms as many of the journalists wondered if an American could offer relevant political insights, given the war and politically charged situation in the Middle East. "But the environment was a refreshing neutral topic — and I felt I made a real connection with reporters" when working on assignments, he noted. FitzPatrick now edits the work of four regional correspondents, which airs on 49 radio stations in the Pacific Northwest.

Michael Hawthorne, formerly of *The Columbus Dispatch*, is the new environmental reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*.

SEJ's First Amendment Task Force, headed by **Ken Ward**, won the Society of Professional Journalists 2003 Sunshine Award. It was in recognition of the task force's Freedom of Information newsletter, the *Watchdog Tipsheet*. The tipsheet, sent to SEJ members, pushes against the tide of closed government that rolled in after Sept. 11, 2001.

SEJ Prez **Dan Fagin** won two awards for his articles on breast cancer clusters, environmental epidemiology, and a \$30 million study "crippled by politics," activist pressure and scientific mistakes. His three *Newsday* articles, "What Went Wrong," "Study in Frustration" and "Still Search" received top honors from the American Association for the Advancement of Science and National Association of Science Writers mid-February. NASW judges described his work as an "even-handed look at a highly politicized investigation," showing "what happens when the world of epidemiology collides with public misconceptions and hopes as well as political pressure."

The Time-Picayune's **John McQuaid** and **Mark Schleifstein** won the American Society of Civil Engineers 2003 Excellence in Media Award for their article on Louisiana's growing vulnerability to a catastrophic hurricane. "Washing Away" also swept away the 2003 National Hurricane Conference media award, and was finalist of the Scripps Howard Foundation's 2002 Edward Meeman Award for Environmental Reporting for large newspapers.

Pete Salmansohn's book, "Saving Birds: Heroes Around the World," was chosen as one of the best science books for children in 2003 by the National Science Teachers Association. Coauthored by Steve Kress, the book tells stories of people in China, Israel, Mexico, New Zealand, Sarawak and the United States, working to save threatened birds. Salmansohn, a long-time educator with the Audubon Society, said his life's goal is to

help "create a new generation of Rachel Carsons and Jacques Cousteaus and Roger Tory Petersons. "Saving Birds" is geared for grades 3-7 and is a licensed Audubon Society book.

Emilia Askari was among the team of the *Detroit Free Press* reporters that won an Oakes Award for the series *Damaged Lives: Lead's Toxic Toll*.

Karen Schaefer, reporter/producer WCPN in Cleveland, Ohio, received an honorable mention from *The Communicator* for *Human Origins*, a one-hour call in with three pre-eminent U.S. paleontologists.

The battle **Dick Russell** helped fight in the early 1980s to protect the Atlantic striped bass is the subject of his upcoming book, "The Striper Wars, An

American Fish Story." Russell, an avid summer sports fisherman in Massachusetts, was actively involved in a coast-wide campaign to protect the dwindling species against overfishing. His work in the conservation campaign was also his introduction to covering the ocean and environmental crises.

"Striper Wars" is both a "chronicle of success, with lessons that can hopefully be applied to other ocean species, as well a warning about the critical need for ecosystem management and continued diligence," Russell said. Island Press/Shearwater Books will publish his work next year. This is his fourth book.

A revised edition of **Phil Shabecoff's** book on the history of the American environmental movement, "A Fierce Green Fire," was recently reissued by Island Press.

This update describes the environmental policies, "some would say atrocities of the Bush II administration," Shabecoff said. The revised book includes more on global warning and the failure of the United States and international communities to tackle the threats of greenhouse gases.

A new chapter is devoted to the current political regime in Washington, which with corporate allies "is systematically rolling back a half century of progress in the protection of the environment," he added. The book's final chapter reflects a more pessimistic view of what the future may hold.

"Ark of the Broken Covenant; Protecting the World's Biodiversity Hotspots," by **John Kunich**, also reflects the dismal state of environmental affairs. The book, which was published last year, lays out the magnitude "of the mass extinction crisis, and the abject failure of the world's nations, including the United States, to do anything to stop it," according to Kunich, associate law professor at Roger Williams University Law School.

Nebraska Public Radio Network reporter **Carolyn Johnsen's** book about a more local topic, factory pig farming, came out last September. "Raising a Stink: The Struggle Over Factory Hog Farms in Nebraska," was published by the University of Nebraska Press.

A grant from the Fund for Investigative Journalism allowed Johnsen to take off 10 months to work on the book.

A series of essays on energy by **Peter Fairley** are included in a new book, "Fueling the Future," published last November. His chapter details advances in clean energy technology — from solar power to clean coal — and how the market stymies their adop-

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Media on the move



2004 SEJ annual conference

Pittsburgh meeting will explore Industrial Age pollution and more

By **DON HOPEY**

As Monday Night Football commentators dating back to Howard Cosell have repeatedly told viewers during games involving the Steelers, Pittsburgh lies at the “confluence” of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers, although they regularly mangle the names of the rivers.

What they don't say — and probably don't know — is that the meeting place of those rivers is also where the historic natural resources degradation of the Industrial Age has met an impressive environmental awakening. That's a confluence the Society of Environmental Journalists will explore during our 14th annual conference, hosted by Carnegie Mellon University, Oct. 20-24.

After three consecutive years on the coastal plains SEJ will be on the hillier terrain of Appalachian Mountains western front. We'll see scenic river valleys and valleys filled by mine refuse, picturesque mountains and mountain-top removal, the Great Lakes and lakes deadened by acid rain.

The Ohio River, one of the nation's biggest working rivers, starts here. Lewis and Clark started here. So did Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey and Annie Dillard. Frank Lloyd Wright built here. This is the home state of Gifford Pinchot and SEJ.

It's where you can see the nation's largest “green” building and ride a bike on the longest rails-to-trails route east of the Mississippi — the Great Allegheny Passage — which stretches from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C. And, since we'll be convening just a couple of weeks before the general election we'll be inviting President Bush and his Democratic opponent to talk about their environmental policies and positions.

The conference will feature a record number of tours and mini-tours, and a diverse and provocative array of panels on brownfields, environmental justice, eastern wilderness, sprawl, urban parks, acid mine drainage, women's environmental health issues, soot and the First Amendment.

The tours on Thursday and Saturday will take conference goers as far north as Lake Erie's Presque Isle State Park, the nation's second most visited park (behind Great Smoky Mountains National Park), and south into West Virginia on planes that will fly over mountain-top removal sites.

One tour will roll through the coalfields of southwestern Pennsylvania to examine the effects of longwall mining — a deep mining technique that causes immediate subsidence of up to four feet — on houses, communities and streams.

Another will visit Johnstown, where an 1889 dam failure killed 2,209 people and we hope to witness the removal of one of five dams that will be dismantled in the area this year.

Yet another will visit the site of the first nuclear accident in the United States — not Three Mile Island (too far) — but Waltz Mills, an experimental Westinghouse facility where a partial meltdown occurred in 1960. The now nearly complete \$50 million cleanup actually started with out-of-work coal miners using Comet cleanser and women's sanitary napkins to wipe down contaminated reactor and containment vessels. This tour also features



Pittsburgh's David L. Lawrence Convention Center is the world's largest green building.

Photo courtesy of THE GREATER PITTSBURGH CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU

a stop at one of the wind farms that make the state the biggest wind power producer east of the Mississippi.

A brownfields tour of the Mon Valley, where Pittsburgh's steel mills inspired the famous “hell with the lid off” description, will stop in Donora, where in 1948 toxic pollutants were trapped by an inversion and killed 22 people, leading to some of the nation's first air pollution control laws. It will also visit US Steel's Clairton Coke Works, the largest coking facility in the world, and the Pump House in Homestead, all that's left of the

(Continued on page 24)



Fight for data... (from page 2)

mailed publication that so many SEJers have come to rely upon for sources and story ideas.

A part-time SEJ employee, Joe has been deeply involved in most of what our group has done so far on access issues, working closely with Executive Director Beth Parke and the task force. Since February 2003, Joe has produced 10 special “Watchdog” *TipSheets* focusing specifically on access issues. (They’re all archived at www.sej.org/foia/index7.) He has also helped to write some of the letters that SEJ has filed with the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and Congress protesting various proposals to restrict environmental data. (All of SEJ’s comments are archived at www.sej.org/foia/index5.)

Joe has another quality that is an important asset to SEJ: he’s tech-savvy, and understands the boundary-breaking potential of the Internet as a communications tool. He’s launched SEJ’s first blog — he calls it the “Watch Blog,” of course — and is providing almost daily updates on access issues. (You can find a link to the web log at www.sej.org.)

He’s downright eloquent on the subject of the importance of digging, and is committed to drawing links between Washington FOI battles and the daily lives of reporters working far outside the Beltway.

“Groups like SEJ are all about trying to keep the highest standards for journalism in a world that’s rapidly losing its journalistic standards,” Joe said, using an argument that would have made my “exemplar”-loving ancient history professor very happy. “We can help set those standards by challenging our members to do the harder stories rather than the easier ones. The stories where you have to struggle for information are often the ones most worth doing.”

That’s not to say that Joe has been a one-man band. From its beginning two years ago, SEJ’s FOI work has been a team effort, driven by volunteers. Duff Wilson of the *Seattle Times*, for example, did an amazing job designing the “FOI Resources” section of the SEJ web site. Ward, Bruggers, McClure, Mark Schleifstein and I have all helped write up comments to various agencies. Bruggers and Davis have solidified our partnerships with other key groups and coalitions, including the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, the Society of Professional Journalists, and a new Washington-based coalition of journalism groups fighting access curbs. Many SEJ members, meanwhile, have helped make sure that FOI-related issues were prominently featured at our recent annual conferences.

Has any of it made a difference? We believe it has. Certainly other journalism groups have taken notice of what SEJ is doing, and have taken steps to follow suit. The Society of Professional Journalists even gave SEJ one of its 2003 Sunshine Awards, calling the *Watchdog TipSheet* an “important contribution in the area of open government.” More importantly, our members seem to be responding. The task force is energetic, and attendance at the conference FOI sessions has been heartening.

There have also been some encouraging signs that the public and the press are increasingly aware of what’s at stake. *Parade Magazine* took a break from celebrity profiles recently to run a feature highlighting the importance of FOI, showing how two cit-

izen-activists from Woburn, Mass., used disclosure laws to uncover secret plans to expand a local landfill. *U.S. News & World Report* recently ran a terrific investigation about unwarranted FOI denials by FERC and the Department of Defense.

SEJ members, too, seem more energized about these issues now. The First Amendment Task Force recently circulated an online survey about our FOI efforts, and 45 members responded. Almost two-thirds agreed that since Sept. 11 they’ve had more trouble getting access to the information they need for day-to-day reporting. And more than 90 percent agreed that it was very important for SEJ to track access issues at federal environmental agencies, and to voice concerns through letters to public officials.

Clearly, we still have a long way to go. Agency and congressional leaders have shown little inclination to heed advice from SEJ and other journalism groups by modifying their plans to curtail access. And too few of us — myself included — are following Ken’s example and using FOI frequently. In fact, two-thirds of our surveyed members say they file fewer than four FOI requests per year.

That’s why the McCormick Tribune grant is so important. We now have an opportunity to take our FOI efforts to a new level, with Joe serving as our professional staff, working closely with dedicated member-volunteers. Thanks to the new funding, Joe and Beth Parke and the task force are already moving forward with some important initiatives. Joe is going to issue *Watchdog TipSheets* twice a month instead of monthly and will augment the *Watchdogs* with more frequent blog postings. SEJ is going to do more outreach to non-members and to journalism coalitions, and will organize more FOI-related events at the annual conference. We also hope to produce op-ed pieces stressing the importance of open government and may even organize a special conference in Washington on environmental FOI later this year.

“There’s a lot going on in the environmental freedom-of-information area right now. A lot is going by without anyone watching,” Davis said. “My hope and my resolve is that at the very least we can bear witness to some of that, document it, record it and get it out in the public record, where hopefully people will take some note of it. Just the accumulating weight of it all might bring some people to worry a little bit more about whether they’re going to be able to do their jobs well two or three or five years from now.”

What SEJ needs right now are your ideas, and your energy. What else should we be doing on the FOI front? For example, do you think SEJ should undertake FOI compliance audits for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and other agencies? Should we do more hands-on training in the use of FOI laws?

Please let Joe know what you think. Even better, let Joe know how you can help. You can reach him at jdavis@sej.org. The task force is also always looking for new energy, so if you’re interested in joining the group please contact Ken Ward at kward@wvgazette.com.

And if you want to get in good with Ken, tell him you filed an FOI request this week.

Dan Fagin of Newsday is the president of SEJ.



SEJ New Orleans conference:

Packed tours and early-morning headaches

By JAY LETTO

More than 600 hearty souls risked tropical storms and heat and humidity, and resisted the temptations of nearby Bourbon Street, to join us at SEJ's 13th annual conference, hosted by Loyola University New Orleans last September.

Well, most of us resisted the temptations of Bourbon Street... most of the time.

Conference organizers had purposely stretched the agenda to accommodate expected urges to, ah, stay up late in the Crescent City. Having programs on Wednesday, in effect, meant that our conference started a full day earlier than we ever have. Nonetheless, the Wednesday evening awards program attracted 230 attendees this year, compared to 250 attendees for the same program on Thursday evening in 2002.

The attractive Wednesday program, including a plenary session with high-level energy executives earlier in the day, may have contributed to our highest Thursday tour attendance ever. We had 280 tour attendees in New Orleans compared to 205 in Baltimore in 2002. Every tour was filled to capacity.

The attendance numbers throughout the agenda were generally different than past years, likely due to the Bourbon Street factor. For example, we had more people at the Wednesday evening awards program than we had at the Friday morning opening plenary.

Even more odd, we had more people on tours on Thursday than we had in concurrent sessions on Friday morning. Don't let your boss or spouse read this, but apparently the pull from nearby bars and restaurants over-powered the likes of natural disaster coverage, and invasive species and climate change panels, for a significant number of attendees.

Attendees returned 46 evaluation forms this year. Among the findings:

- About half the attendees pay their own expenses to attend the conference.
- An indication of how important the SEJ conference is to our members is that 36 of the 46 respondents said that ours is the only journalism conference they attended last year.
- Members overwhelmingly favor news sources over journalists on the panels. SEJ, though, will continue to include a mix of speakers and session types.
- This year's membership meeting easily garnered the best response since we gave out free beer several years ago in L.A.
- Network meals and various breakout roundtable sessions, like EPA PIOs, all continue to be very popular.
- There were two new session types added last year. The beat dinners (a natural for New Orleans) were extremely popular, though many complained that it was hard to hear speakers at the restaurants. The breakfast roundtable sessions were also popular, though many complained that they were scheduled too early.
- We'll include both beat dinners and breakfast sessions in perhaps slightly altered form in Pittsburgh.

- Attendees simply loved the privately organized hospitality suites, and we'll continue them in Pittsburgh as well.

- The number of attendees who reported filing stories from the conference was 16 out of the 39 members (not including non-members) who returned forms. This might suggest that more than 100 stories were filed from the conference.

There were numerous complaints about the continuous



Photo courtesy of KENNETH FRIEDMAN

The post-conference tour took SEJers to Timbalier Island.

endowment pleas, such as this from network lunch: "Not enough time, continuous interruptions by SEJ staff re endowment, very disruptive." While we'll work hard to minimize the disruptions of these pleas in Pittsburgh, quite frankly we were so successful raising money last year that this will continue in some form at future conferences.

The evaluations were overwhelmingly positive, as in past years. Here are a couple of memorable quotes:

"Best journalism conference I've attended. A whirlwind of people, places, and events packed with information."

"These are the best journalism conferences for the best value and are the most fun."

Finally, we get numerous totally contradictory responses every year. Here are a couple of my favorites from New Orleans:

From the Basic Evaluation question, one said that the conference was "Packed with story ideas." While another complained: "I expected more true story opportunities."

And, in Pet Peeves and Peak Experiences, I read these two responses one after the other: "Get more journalists and editors.;" and "It's marvelous to meet so many other journalists with similar interests."

Join us in Pittsburgh for SEJ's 14th annual conference, hosted by Carnegie Mellon University, Oct. 20-24. We promise it'll be "packed with story ideas" and you'll get to meet "many other journalists with similar interests."

Jay Letto is SEJ's conference manager.

Decoding the debate over federal peer review

By CHERYL HOGUE

Publishing an article involves a different process of scrutiny depending on if you're a journalist or a scientist.

Journalists usually tangle with their editors directly, whether face-to-face in the newsroom or over the phone or even by email. We know who our editors are and who signs their paychecks.

In contrast, technical papers get an in-depth going-over by scientists in the same field who are anonymous and often unpaid. These reviewers pore over a draft article, probing and challenging the science presented. They may even suggest that the authors carry out more experiments and gather more data before the paper gets published. They don't actually make the changes in the final report — it's up to the journal's editors to decide which of the reviewers' recommendations to adopt. There's no direct arguing between authors and the unseen, unnamed "peer reviewers."

Peer review serves two basic functions. First, it is a filter designed to prevent sloppy, or perhaps fraudulent, science from getting into print. Second, peer review serves as a collaborative process among fellow scientists and improves the quality of the articles that do get published. Among most scientists, peer review is in the same league as apple pie and motherhood — it's virtually sacrosanct. Peer review, while not totally foolproof, gives scientific legitimacy to published studies.

Federal agencies often seek peer review on the scientific

documents they assemble. These documents, like EPA's risk assessment of dioxins, are based on a synthesis of published scientific studies and may include results from computer models about the toxicity of chemicals. Such peer review is usually different than the anonymous peer review done for scientific journals. The names of peer reviewers, who are drawn from industry, academia, state governments and advocacy groups, are

known. Panels of reviewers — including committees of EPA's Science Advisory Board — have meetings open to the public, as required under the Federal Advisory Committee Act. Like the peer review done for scientific journals, this type of examination provides an imprimatur of scientific validity to the government's scientific analyses.

Each agency or department in the federal government evaluates its own peer review needs.

But now, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is planning to change that situation by establishing a single standard for peer review that would apply across the government. It would apply only to science-based documents that are used as a basis for regulation, such as risk assessment. National security information would be exempt.

The plan came from OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, which must approve all federal rules, including environmental standards, before agencies can officially issue

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predict
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Often ignored, conservation easements grow across nation

By **JOE STEPHENS**

Two years ago in the Great Smoky Mountains, developers paid \$10 million for a tract of North Carolina forest and began developing 350 home sites and an 18-hole golf course.

A prime example of urban sprawl? The developers say no, pointing out that this particular subdivision was backed by \$20 million in tax incentives meant to help protect the environment.

The key to the deal was what's known as a conservation easement, an increasingly popular tool of environmentalists — and of developers seeking huge tax breaks.

Conservation easements have grown controversial over the last year as *The Washington Post* has written a series of articles exploring their use. The U.S. Senate Finance Committee has begun investigating tax write offs taken in conjunction with easements “donated” to the Nature Conservancy and other land trusts.

Easements are permanent deed restrictions that limit some types of intrusive development — such as dense subdivisions or strip mines — while often permitting limited construction. Landowners seek nonprofit land trusts or a government agency willing to take an easement as a gift.

By accepting the gift, the land trust, in effect, certifies that the restrictions are meaningful and benefit the public. That allows the donor to seek federal income tax deductions. Easement donors can seek tax deductions for any loss of property value caused by the restrictions, an amount generally established by appraisers hired by the donor.

Conservation easements held by local land trusts have grown more than fivefold nationwide since 1990, to an estimated 12,000 today. Local land trusts hold easements totaling 2.6 million acres, more than double the land they own outright.

In the Smoky Mountains project, the developers created a 3,000-acre easement area broken up by the fairways and home sites,

which spot the land like pepperonis on a pizza. The federal tax deduction of roughly \$20 million was based largely on an appraiser's assessment of how much the land near Asheville, N.C., would have been worth had they filled the acreage with 1,400 homes.

There is little independent information available about the size of easement tax deductions claimed nationwide. But a 1984 IRS study examined 42 deductions for easement donations and determined that all but one appeared inflated, resulting in overvalua-

tions totaling nearly \$32 million. According to a GAO report on the study, “The taxpayers generally overvalued their conservation easement deductions by an average of about 220 percent.”

Since easements are attached to land deeds, most can be readily found at your local courthouse. Figuring out which plots have easements, however, can be a challenge. Most states have no central registry. Luckily, land trusts sometimes list the “donations” on their web sites and in organization newsletters. They also at times are listed in real estate ads — perhaps surprisingly, as a sales point.

Reading the fine print on the easements can be enlightening — and make for good local stories.

Our articles looked at Brandon Park, the personal retreat of late chemical heiress Wilhelmina duPont Ross. Visitors to the family estate in New York's Adirondack Mountains pull up at a gated and guarded entrance. The road then winds through a 27,000-acre private forest dotted with nine ponds and traversed by 10 miles of the St. Regis River. The grounds feature at least 16 homes, cabins and other buildings, linked by more than 60 miles of roads and trails, records show.

In 1978, Ross gave the Nature Conservancy an easement restricting commercial development on the remote site and requiring that it remain forever a “natural and scenic area.” She claimed a federal income tax break of more than \$1 million — \$2.5 million in today's dollars.

A reading of the easement shows that Ross retained the right to build 10 new homes, mine gravel pits, drill for oil, cut trees, subdivide the land and expel the public. Two decades later, during a local property tax dispute, a panel of state judges pointed out that local governments already heavily regulated development of the estate, meaning that “any further development of the land was unlikely, even if the land was not subject to the conservation easement.”

Ross died in 2000. Her lawyer explained that, unlike state

officials, federal authorities calculate a property's potential future value when establishing tax breaks. The IRS initially challenged the deduction, he said, but ultimately agreed that \$1 million “was an appropriate deduction.”

Joe Stephens is a reporter on The Washington Post's national investigative desk. His and

David Ottaway's series, The Nature Conservancy, was featured as an Inside Story in the SEJournal's Fall 2003 issue. His email: stephensj@washpost.com.



For more information on conservation easements:

- A survey of problems with conservation easements conducted by the Bay Area Open Space Council: <http://www.openspacecouncil.org/Documents/Easements/EnsuringThePromise.pdf>
- *Virginia Law Review* article, “Perpetual Restrictions on Land and the Problem of the Future.” <http://www.virginialawreview.org/abstracts/vol88/8841.html>
- *The Washington Post* article, “Developers find payoff in preservation”: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A17384-2003Dec20.html>
- *The Washington Post* article, “Nonprofit Sells Scenic Acreage to Allies at a Loss; Buyers Gain Tax Breaks With Few Curbs on Land Use”: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A17955-2003May5¬Found=true>
- *The Washington Post* series on The Nature Conservancy and environmental tax breaks: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/nation/specials/natureconservancy/>

Research News Roundup

Examining impacts of news coverage of WTO, EMF risks

By JAN KNIGHT

Communication studies suggest that the news media impact how members of special-interest groups view themselves, including suggesting which opinions people should hold as members of certain groups and which groups “should” play a role in certain issues. Six researchers at the University of Washington recently tested this theory in a study focusing on the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle.

Among other things, they found that news coverage polarized opinions of union members against the WTO in terms of the organization’s image and its economic and environmental policies. But among business groups, news coverage contributed to building more positive views of the WTO’s environmental policies. Among environmental and human rights groups, news media coverage appeared to contribute to a more negative view of the WTO’s image, but it didn’t change their views of its environmental and economic policies.

Interest groups may differ greatly in their perceptions of issues, and research suggests that media coverage of these groups tends to accentuate these differences. Individual group members often look to the group for guidance during times of uncertainty, using the news media to guide them in their assessment of their own group. Members may shift their opinions to match what they perceive to be the opinions of their group, and they may take on more extreme positions than they would individually in order to “belong” to their group. This can result, research suggests, in more definite, polarizing lines being drawn between interest groups, creating a challenge when trying to find consensus on issues such as those presented by the WTO.

The news media are believed to hold large influence here. While interest groups may provide people with ways to express their opinions and help them interpret issues via their group rela-

tionships, the researchers suggested that media reports, “by depicting which groups are at odds over a particular issue, signal which social identities are relevant to the problem. News reports can illustrate the normative opinions group members should adopt. . . [and] these opinions may be exaggerated in the media coverage and in the perceptions of [group members].”

The researchers studied the Seattle WTO meeting in 1999 because communication about it was intense for several weeks before and during the meeting; because many interest groups actively protested for and against certain aspects of a global trade agreement; and because the views of these interest groups were widely covered by the news media.

The authors examined 1,185 articles about the WTO meeting appearing in three Seattle-area newspapers — the *Seattle Times*, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and *Bremerton Sun* — and two national newspapers, the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. News coverage of the WTO meeting increased throughout 1999 to a peak of 38.8 stories per day during the meeting, held between Nov. 30 and Dec. 3. Stories about the WTO dominated coverage during the 11 months before the meeting, while protest coverage dominated during the meeting.

They also conducted a survey of 490 randomly selected Puget Sound ferry passengers, questioning half of them two weeks before the meeting and the other half two weeks after the meeting. The survey included questions about respondents’ group affiliation, their opinions of the WTO’s image, and their opinions about the economic and environmental implications of its trade policy. They also asked respondents how much attention they paid to news media coverage of the WTO.

Most respondents said they did not belong to a special interest group (35.4 percent), followed by those who said that they belonged to a church group (19.8 percent), business group (17.7 percent), human rights/environmental group (15.6 percent) and union group (11.5 percent). Business group members tended to have higher incomes than members of other groups, while members of environmental groups tended to be more educated than members of other groups.

The researchers found that:

- Union members paid more attention to news media coverage of the WTO and their views became more negative of the WTO’s image and economic and environmental policies during the time period studied.
- Church-group members paid little attention to news media coverage of the WTO and their views didn’t change during the time period studied.
- Environmental group members paid attention to news media coverage, but this appeared to affect only their opinion of the WTO’s image (it became more negative over time).
- Business group members paid attention to news media coverage, but this appeared to affect only their opinion of the WTO’s environmental policies, which became more positive over time although the bulk of the coverage during the meeting focused on the protests.

The researchers concluded that “media portrayals of group
(Continued on page 31)

Here's a better way to delve into online information

By AMY GAHRAN

As more and more environmental news and information becomes available online, how can a reporter use it to follow this beat without succumbing to total information overload?

Into this quandary steps a relatively new online media channel that can help you follow emerging news and issues efficiently: RSS feeds.

RSS stands for *Rich Site Summary* or *Really Simple Syndication*, take your pick. In a nutshell, RSS is an easy way for people who publish online content (including environmental news) to notify interested readers about their freshest information.

An RSS feed is a **capsule summary of new content** published online. It works rather like a news wire. When an online publisher posts a new article, an automated system also posts key parts of that article (usually the headline, date, time, and a brief summary or excerpt) to the RSS feed. People who subscribe to that RSS feed receive that summary information instantly, and they can click a link embedded in a feed item to access the full text of that article.

Getting Started: What You Need

To access RSS feeds, you need software called a **feed reader**.

Most feed readers are fairly cheap, such as NetNewsWire (\$40, <http://ranchero.com/netnewswire>), Newsgator (\$30, <http://newsgator.com>), or my favorite: FeedDemon (\$30, <http://feeddemon.com>). Others are free, such as AmphetaDesk (<http://www.disobey.com/amphetaDesk>), Feedreader (<http://sourceforge.net/projects/feedreader>), or intraVNews (<http://www.intravnews.com>). Many more are available with various features and interfaces, for all operating systems. Here's a good list: <http://blogspace.com/rss/readers>.

Perhaps the easiest way for beginners to first explore the world of RSS feeds is to set up an account on Bloglines, a free web-based feed reader service: <http://www.bloglines.com>. Bloglines is good for a start, but eventually you'll probably want to install a feed reader (software) on your computer for greater control, reliability, and flexibility.

The Benefits: Why You Should Try RSS

The main benefits that RSS offers to people who need a steady stream of fresh information from a wide variety of sources (such as journalists) are:

It's efficient. You can collect, in one place at one time, headlines or synopses of fresh content from several sources. This makes it easy and fast to scan the latest content offerings, without having to visit many sites or open many e-mail newsletters individually.

It's spam-proof. The only way you can receive an RSS feed is to subscribe to it with your feed reader. No one can send you an RSS feed you haven't requested. Spammers cannot sneak their messages into the content of an existing feed. Also, when you subscribe to a feed you are not giving any information (such as your e-mail address) to anyone.

It's free. There is no charge to receive RSS feeds, and many good feed readers are free.

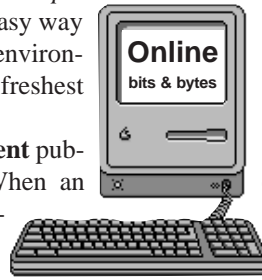
It's pretty easy. Using RSS is not yet *quite* as simple as using a Web browser, but it's not much more complicated either.

It's versatile and customizable. You can easily subscribe and unsubscribe to various feeds as often as your information needs and tastes shift. You can elect to read headlines only, headlines plus summaries, or more content if it's available via RSS. You can also set up custom feeds to meet your needs.

Simple access to weblogs. More and more organizations are publishing high-quality weblogs. Most weblogs offer RSS feeds (weblog software makes that easy), which makes RSS the most efficient way to monitor and mine this increasingly valuable resource.

Subscribing to Feeds

This is pretty simple. Once you install a feed reader or set up a Bloglines account, practice subscribing to a weblog or news site's RSS feed. A good one to start



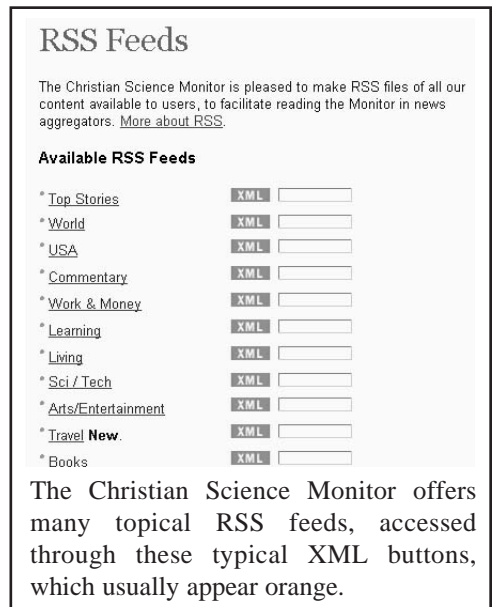
with is SEJ's own "Your Right to Know" weblog, by Joe Davis.

Go to that weblog's home page: <http://radio.weblogs.com/0131722>. Look for the little orange button there that says XML. You've probably seen buttons like that (or similar blue ones, or ones that say RSS) on many websites by now.

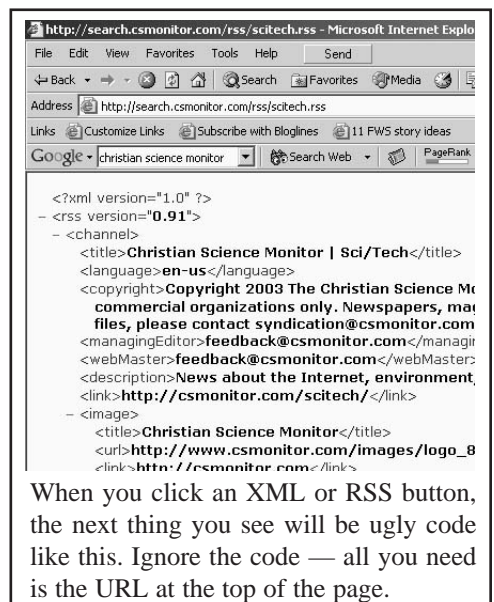
(Fig. 1) They may look cryptic, but they all mean the same thing: *Click here to get this site's feed.*

Once you click on that button, things get a bit geeky. The next thing you'll see will be a web page filled with ugly, unreadable code. (Fig. 2) Don't worry, you don't have to read that stuff! All you need to do is copy the URL of that page. Then go back to your feed reader, tell it you want to subscribe to a new feed, and paste in that URL. That's all!

(Continued on page 14)



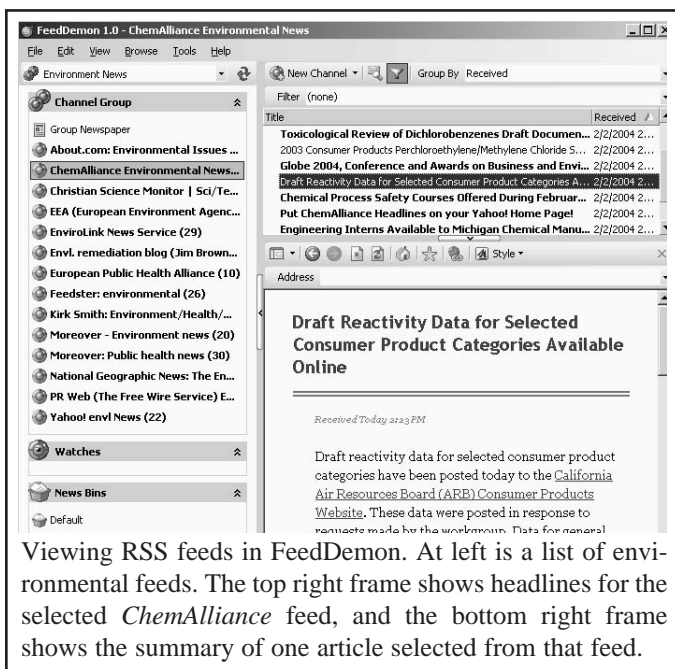
The Christian Science Monitor offers many topical RSS feeds, accessed through these typical XML buttons, which usually appear orange.



When you click an XML or RSS button, the next thing you see will be ugly code like this. Ignore the code — all you need is the URL at the top of the page.

RSS feeds... (from page 13)

Once you've subscribed to several feeds, you can easily group them and peruse them quickly through your feed reader



software or service. Your feed reader will always grab the latest content and present it in a consistent format. (Fig 3)

Finding Feeds

Once you're all set up to handle RSS feeds, how do you find the best feeds for you?

The first thing to do is visit all your favorite websites and look for those orange or blue XML or RSS buttons, or text-only links that say XML or RSS. Subscribe to whatever feeds you find that way.

You can also search various indexes of feeds, such as Syndic8.com, for terms such as "environmental" or "chemical." Or check out the resources listed in this excellent November 2003 *Environment Writer* article by Joe Davis, "RSS Feeds: The Next Cool Thing?" http://environmentwriter.org/resources/articles/1103_rssnewsfeed.htm

You can create a custom feed that searches thousands of RSS feeds for specific keywords at Feedster.com. Just search for your key word or phrase, and when the results pop up, click the blue-and-orange RSS 2.0 button at the top of the page, then subscribe to the URL of the resulting page.

If you find a site offering great environmental news or information, but they don't provide an RSS feed, you can sometimes "reverse-engineer" one (at least for headlines) with this free online tool: <http://www.MyRSS.com>.

Or you can contact their public-relations director or webmaster and bug them to create a feed. Tell them even PRNewswire offers RSS feeds now: <http://www.prnewswire.com/news/aboutrss/rss.shtml>. Point them to this RSS Primer for Publishers and Content Providers: http://www.evl.ac.uk/rss_primer.

And tell them to wake up and smell the 21st century!

Amy Gahrn is an independent writer, editor and trainer based in Boulder, Colo. (www.gahrn.com). Her weblog CONTENTIOUS (blog.contentious.com) covers many content topics, including RSS. She can be reached at amy@gahrn.com.

Endowment... (from page 5)

turned to outside "rabbis" for guidance and vetted their ideas broadly within SEJ.

"They considered the implications of a policy on various stakeholders and they weighed multiple alternatives for action. They respected contrarian views while also moving toward a reasonable consensus position on this policy. The process is always as important as the product. In this case the SEJ Board can feel confident that transparency will reveal due diligence in that process."

The board in January also appointed an SEJ Endowment Committee, which will be leading the fund-raising effort. It consists of the following board members: Fagin, Thomson, Brenda Box, Christy George, Carolyn Whetzel, and me. Others appointed to the committee are former SEJ President Emilia Askari, former SEJ board member Peter Dykstra, author Philip Shabecoff and Robert Thomas, who was co-chair of SEJ's 2003 annual conference. Beth Parke, SEJ executive director, is an ex-officio member.

The board may add others to the committee in the coming months. Thomson should especially be commended for working extremely hard to help SEJ leaders reach consensus on the issue.

"The guidelines map out the ethical terrain on which our endowment campaign will be conducted," Thomson told me.

"The guidelines tell the world what our values, priorities and responsibilities are, and serve as a constant reminder of these things to our board.

"They are a way of assuring our members that they can have confidence that in our quest for financial stability, we're not somehow going to undermine the integrity of the organization.

"They show the larger world what we stand for and the ethical standards we hold ourselves to, and they tell prospective donors that this is an organization which, as much as we would value their donation, values our independence and integrity even more."

The endowment guidelines are posted on the SEJ website, www.sej.org, along with our other financial guidelines. To see them, click on "About SEJ/Financial Guidelines" and go to paragraph F.

And please, make a contribution today. You can access a contribution form by clicking on "About SEJ/Support SEJ," or calling the SEJ office and asking for one. The number is: 215-884-8174.

Thanks for your support of SEJ — past, present and future.

You can reach James Bruggers at jbruggers@courier-journal.com.

Mercury: A key presidential campaign issue?

By MARGIE KRIZ

Mercury is fast becoming a high-profile issue in the political, environmental and health-care arenas.

On Jan. 20, the Sierra Club ran television and newspaper ads in 11 markets, timed to coincide with President Bush's State of the Union address, criticizing the administration for not taking more aggressive action to restrict toxic mercury emissions from the nation's 1,100 coal-fired power plants.

Several Democratic presidential candidates have also taken aim at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's recent proposal to regulate mercury from power plants. Howard Dean, for example, charged that the mercury rule proves that "once again, the Bush administration is selling our health, our environment and our economic security to its campaign contributors."

The mercury battle is also heating up at the state level. Frustrated by years of federal inaction, environmental regulators in several states have adopted or are working on tough new controls on mercury emissions from local electric power plants. And Congress is sounding the alarm. Ten moderate Republicans and a group of New England senators recently sent separate letters to the Bush administration calling for the EPA to withdraw its mercury proposal and replace it with stricter controls.

Critics say the mercury proposal presents serious public relations problems for Bush. "There is a case to be made that mercury is the new arsenic," Natural Resources Defense Council lawyer David McIntosh said, referring to EPA's 2001 effort to scale back controls on arsenic in drinking water. Some say the resulting public outrage severely damaged Bush's public standing on environmental issues. Some political and environmental analysts go a step further, predicting that the mercury debate could play a role in this fall's presidential contest.

At the center of the storm is EPA's decade-long effort to crack down on power plant emissions of mercury, a neurotoxin which can harm fetal development and cause learning disabilities and neurological damage in small children. Humans are exposed to mercury when they eat fish contaminated with the metal. According to the Centers for Disease Control, eight percent of U.S. women of childbearing age carry concentrations of mercury at levels high enough to be dangerous to fetuses. A 2000 National Academy of Sciences study estimated that 60,000 children are harmed by mercury exposure every year.

Over the years, concern about mercury's health impacts caused federal regulators to restrict all other major industrial sources of mercury pollution. But coal-fired power plants totally escaped such restraints, even though they produce 48 tons of the highly toxic substance each year — the largest source of man-made emissions in the United States.

Now EPA is proposing the first federal rule to control coal-plant emissions. The proposal recommends creation of a mercury "cap-and-trade" program, which would allow electric companies to buy and sell pollution credits depending on how easy it is for a plant to lower its mercury emissions. The electric industry would be required to cut its total annual mercury emissions to 15 tons by 2018 — a 69 percent reduction. The proposal also includes an interim cap of 34 tons by 2010.

The EPA's new mercury plan would not only allow electric companies to buy and sell credits for mercury. It would also permit them to "bank" emission credits that they earn under the first phase of the program for use in future years. As a result, the total industry mercury emissions for 2018 are expected to total more than EPA's 15-ton target, according to one agency analysis. (The proposed rule also asks for public comments on two other alternatives, but EPA appears to be downplaying those alternatives).

The measure is coming under serious attack from critics who charge that the plan would cause "hot spots" of high mercury contamination that would be dangerous to people living in those regions. They charge that the standard is too weak and delays serious reductions for far longer than the industry is technically able to achieve. And they disparage the Bush administration's attempt to apply an unlikely part of the Clean Air Act to establish the emissions trading program — a move that both environmentalists and industry lobbyists agree is likely to trigger years of legal challenges.

For their part, Bush administration officials are fighting back. They insist that they're recommending a 2018 goal for cutting mercury emissions because the most advanced mercury control technologies won't be available any sooner. EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt argues that EPA officials deserve credit for being the first federal regulators to propose a cap on mercury emissions from power plants. By contrast, he noted, the Clinton administration had to be sued twice by environmental activists before beginning to move forward with mercury controls. "Frankly previous administrations have put this decision off for a long time," he said in an interview. "We made the decision that we were not going to walk away from it."

EPA's mercury proposal is designed to be nearly identical to President Bush's 2002 legislative initiative to rewrite the Clean Air Act, which the White House has dubbed its "clear skies" bill. That measure would set up a cap-and-trade program to curb power plant emissions of not only mercury, but also sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides. But despite Bush's push for congressional passage of his clear skies bill, GOP leaders have conceded that they don't have the votes to get the bill through the Senate.

Now the EPA is trying to create a regulatory version of the clear skies bill. Because the Clean Air Act does not explicitly allow EPA to set up a trading program for mercury, however, regulators have had to do some fancy footwork to legally justify the new program.

(Continued on page 22)

Howard Dean has charged that the mercury rule proves that "once again, the Bush administration is selling our health, our environment and our economic security to its campaign contributors."

The roots of e-journalism

or, life before Rachel Carson

Editor's note: Before the modern environmental movement emerged in the 1960s, before Rachel Carson, the media's coverage of what today might be termed environmental issues focused on conservation of an emerging nation's natural resources. In an effort to fill in a bit of that historical blank for today's environmental journalist, the SEJournal has obtained permission from the author to excerpt his recently published article from "The Encyclopedia of International Media and Communications."

By **MICHAEL FROME**

The years from about 1880 to 1915 saw the establishment of national parks and national forests, the advent of forestry, and the birth and growth of the conservation movement. Science played a key role in defining national needs and goals and in communicating them to the public. The American Academy for the Advancement of Science had already (during the 1870s) fostered concern over destructive forest fires and initiated establishment of the American Forestry Association. Major John Wesley Powell, the colorful one-armed Civil War veteran, published a thrilling account of his epochal trip down the Colorado River and a scholarly blueprint for conservative settlement of the arid lands of the West. In Washington, D.C., Powell directed both the U.S. Geological Survey, an agency of the Department of the Interior, and the Bureau of Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution.

Leaders of federal resource agencies sparked the conservation movement and influenced the media to support it. Gifford Pinchot, the first American-born trained forester (who studied in Europe because there were no forestry schools in the United States), was a close friend and ally of President Theodore Roosevelt and a born public relations professional. Stephen T. Mather, the first director of the National Park Service (1916-1928), had begun his career as a newspaper reporter at the New York Sun. Later, he went into business and accumulated wealth. He personally initiated the organization of the National Parks Association and contributed significantly to starting the Save the Redwoods League in California.

The early years of the 20th century were the period of population and progressivism, marked by women's suffrage, civil service, municipal home rule, prison reform, and child protection laws. It was the time when muckrakers of the media, including Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, and Ray Stannard Baker, flourished and influenced the course of history. Yet the periodicals for which they were worked were mostly weeklies, monthlies, and alternative media rather than "mainstream" daily newspapers.

Irving Newton Brant likely was influenced by muckrakers, considering that he too made his life's work a challenge to readers and the political system. In the *Saturday Evening Post* of June 26, 1926, Brant wrote, "The Petrified Forest of Arizona is being looted and smashed to pieces by the motoring public of America....The Government of the United States is virtually on the side of the looters." Brant, who was born in 1885, began his newspaper career as a school boy, working for a small-town Iowa newspaper that his father published. Subsequently, he spent 30

years as a reporter, foreign correspondent, an editorial writer and an editorial page editor for major newspapers, including the *Des Moines Register*, the *St. Louis Star Times* and the *Chicago Sun*.

Brant was a formidable figure in conservation during the 1930s and 1940s, collaborating with Rosalie Edge and Willard Van Name in the Emergency Conservation Committee (ECC), and was an adviser to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes. Van Name was a biologist at the American Museum of Natural History, and Edge was a wealthy New York matron-turned-social activist. Her favorite project was the protection of hawks in migration across eastern Pennsylvania from hunters, leading her to purchase the prime shooting area and transforming it into the current Hawk Mountain Sanctuary.

The three principals kept the ECC small, intimate and effective. Brant wrote the following of the ECC:

I could strike hard on any issue without being toned down by the conflicting interests of a large board of directors or a diverse membership. This was particularly valuable at a time when almost every nationally organized conservation body was in the paralyzing grip of wealthy sportsmen, gun companies or lumbermen who were devastating whole states.

Edge used Brant as the ECC's principal pamphleteer — for mailings to lists of activists who would respond to calls for letters and telegrams. Thus, Brant was projected into nearly every nationwide conservation fight for more than 30 years. Then, with Franklin D. Roosevelt's election in 1932, Brant found new and bigger opportunities. Roosevelt took a personal interest in conservation policy. So did Ickes, the self-styled "curmudgeon," and soon Brant was writing speeches and strategy papers for both of them.

Brant's monograph, "The Olympic Forests for a National Park" (published by the ECC in 1938), and his influence with the president proved to be instrumental in the establishment of Olympic National Park. In the monograph, he wrote:

If the Mount Olympus National Park is made adequate to preserve the finest trees of the peninsula, it will preserve the Roosevelt elk. If it is made adequate to preserve the elk, it will preserve the finest of the Douglas firs, the Sitka spruces, the giant cedars and hemlocks, beneath which the elk gather their browse of vine maple, salmonberries, deer fern, moss and fungus.

The people of the Olympic Peninsula, of the state of Washington and of the United States have a varying yet common interest in the preservation of this last wilderness, this colossal jungle of the northwestern cool tropics, this final habitat of one of the continent's noblest mammals.

Let this land, which belongs to the American people, be placed beyond the despoiling ax and saw, beyond the hunter's rifle, and we shall have for our own enjoyment, and shall hand down to posterity, something better than an indestructible mountain surrounded by a wilderness of stumps.

(Continued next page)

Responding to Postwar Concerns

Whereas Brant's important work came before World War II, Bernard DeVoto's followed after the war. Senator Richard Neuberger of Oregon called DeVoto the most effective conservationist of the 20th century. Wallace Stegner, in his 1988 biography of DeVoto titled *The Uneasy Chair*, wrote, "His conservation writings record a continuing controversy unmarred by any scramble for personal advantage or any impulse toward self-justification, a controversy in every way dignified by concern for the public good and for the future of the West."

DeVoto's most widely read materials probably were his "Easy Chair" columns in *Harper's Magazine*, but he was distinguished as a literary historian who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1948 for *Across the Wide Missouri*. He understood the agenda-setting role of the media in outlining a daily picture of the world and taught conservationists how to use the media with strong, critical, widely cited columns and articles about proposed dams in Dinosaur National Monument, the pitiful postwar state of the national parks, and the political campaign of western stockmen to take control of national forest grazing lands. He did not hesitate to anger people, as when he wrote one Easy Chair column, titled "Outdoor Metropolis," ridiculing coastal Maine as "a jerry-built, neon-lighted overpopulated slum," inciting the Maine Tourist Bureau to withdraw its advertising from *Harpers*.

DeVoto wrote a well-researched and well-documented article about the Dinosaur National Monument controversy in the *Saturday Evening Post* of July 22, 1950, titled "Shall We Let Them Ruin Our National Parks?" Subsequently reprinted in *Reader's Digest* in November 1951, DeVoto's article made Dinosaur a national issue. It encouraged opponents to intensify their campaign until the dam project was defeated. However, it also led to a split — perhaps inevitable — between federal agencies and the citizens conservation movement. Michael Straus, commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation (who earlier had been publicity chief of the Department of the Interior under Ickes), lashed out at "self-constituted long-distance protectors of Dinosaur National Monument in air-conditioned caves overlooking Central Park in New York, Lincoln Park in Chicago, and Boston Commons in the adopted city of a transplanted western writer [DeVoto] who has a tendency to forget his heritage."

During the 1960s and '70s, hardly any daily newspaper's writer exercised greater influence on environmental policy than John B. Oakes, editorial page editor of *The New York Times*. When he joined the *Times* in 1946, his job was editor of the Review of the Week section, but he also wrote a monthly Sunday column titled "Conservation." As early as March 4, 1951, he took up the proposed dams in Dinosaur National Monument in Utah, warning of the

impending "stress on the promotion of organized recreation in our parks and monuments, and a slackening of interest in the preservation of untouched areas of wild and natural beauty for themselves alone." In the edition of May 13, 1956, his Conservation column commended new legislation introduced by Sen. Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota to establish a national wilderness preservation system. It was the beginning of the long political fight leading to passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

During the 15 years (starting in 1961) that he ran the editorial page, Oakes wrote widely quoted commentaries about civil rights, the presidency, foreign affairs, politics and the environment. Even after retirement, he contributed powerful opinion pieces to the op-ed page (which he had started in 1970), including "Watt's Very Wrong" on December 31, 1980, when James G. Watt's nomination was pending in the Senate, and "Adirondack SOS" on Oct. 29, 1988, which in short order elicited a letter to the editor of the *Times* from Gov. Mario Cuomo pledging renewed commitment to preserving the Adirondacks.

"I could strike hard on any issue without being toned down by the conflicting interests of a large board of directors or a diverse membership. This was particularly valuable at a time when almost every nationally organized conservation body was in the paralyzing grip of wealthy sportsmen, gun companies or lumbermen who were devastating whole states."

—Irving N. Brant

Michael Frome has written on conservation and the environment for Field & Stream, Los Angeles Times and American Forests. He has taught at the University of Vermont, University of Idaho and Western Washington University. His books include "Green Ink: An Introduction to Environmental Journalism" and "Green Speak: Fifty Years of Environmental Muckraking and Advocacy."

Media on the move... (from page 6)

tion. The book ranked eighth among hardcover nonfiction best-sellers in the January issue of *Quill & Quire*, a monthly Canadian book trade magazine.

Speaking of energy, a new book by Media on the Move compiler **Elizabeth McCarthy** along with *California Energy Circuit* coeditor **J.A. Savage**, chronicling the country's largest investor-owned utility bankruptcy, will be released next month. "Big Deal,

Pacific Gas & Electric's Bankruptcy" is a compilation of articles covering courtroom intrigue, deal making and sheer chutzpah of the Chapter 11 saga, which involved 140,000 acres of watershed lands and a bankruptcy tab close to \$8 billion.

If you would like to inform your SEJ colleagues about a career move, a book you have written and/or an award you have won, contact e2mccarthy@cs.com with details.

EPA enforcement... (from page 1)

SEJournal talked to the Knight Ridder Washington bureau writer about how he wrote the story:

Q. Tell me how the whole idea for the story started.

A. It started early on in the Bush administration when two top environmental enforcement officials quit, saying they were not

have gotten something even better. But I have to do these projects on the side while doing dailies.

Q. What documents did you request and why?

A. I asked Eric Schaeffer, Sylvia Lowrance (who was the acting enforcement chief under Bush II for 16 months) and Dan

Esty of Yale (a former Bush I top aide) what to look for. They said EPA keeps quarterly summaries for all sorts of enforcement categories and then told me what they were. All I had to do was ask for them. I went back 15 years because going back further would not have been fair because laws have changed dramatically.

It was a good date that brought in three administrations. Quarterly figures also give you the ability to look for short- and long-term trends. They said enforcement is a pipeline (everyone uses this analog

gy and I grew sick of it). So Bush II inherited many cases from Clinton and looks good because of previous work, and the same for Clinton and Bush I. The key way to eliminate this, they said, is to ask for notices of violations. These are the first step in the enforcement process. They are initial citations from EPA saying, we caught you doing something wrong, let's talk.

Bill Reilly, EPA chief under Bush I, said these really get companies' attention and he knows this from personal experience while on the board of directors of a cruise ship company. I also asked for enforcement categories by the law violated, i.e. Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, RCRA. That was to see if there was any trend by resource — air, water, hazardous waste.

In addition to NOV's (notices of violation), which former EPA people said were most important but Bush EPA people said were useless (because [EPA's issuance of NOV's had] dropped precipitously), I asked for administrative penalties in dollar amounts, administrative penalties, civil and criminal referrals to DOJ, and civil penalties assessed (in dollars also). The criminal figures turned out to be too fluid because of prosecutions and trials, so I limited this to just civil enforcement. I was then able to break down each of these categories into sub-categories by law or resource. Thus I had air NOV's, water NOV's, etc. I only broke categories down when I had enough numbers to be meaningful, granted a judgment call here.

Q. Once you began to receive all of this information, how did you manage all of it?

A. This time, I was called by a data officer in the Office of
(Continued next page)

Courtesy of THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER



Borenstein's story led *The Philadelphia Inquirer* on Dec. 9, 2003.

allowed to enforce air pollution laws. It's heavily tied up in the political/regulatory issue of new source review. I kept getting told by state air regulators and environmental activists that EPA wasn't enforcing air pollution rules. So I kept watching the issue. At first, I tried David Burnham and TRAC (Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse) analysis, out of Syracuse, on criminal cases, but it didn't quite jibe with what I saw out of EPA. Then I used (former EPA enforcement chief and now watchdog group head) Eric Schaeffer's painstaking analysis of every civil case settlement. I wrote that story, but it was someone else's research and I felt I should look more comprehensively and do it myself.

I also wanted to look at 15 years of data because it would give a good comparison to past administrations, especially the first Bush administration. I felt it wasn't right to just compare Clinton and Bush II and that turned out to really make my story because the fact that environmental enforcement was at its zenith under Bill Reilly and Bush I makes this seem less partisan. It's also so counter-intuitive.

Q. I know this was not the first time you tried to document enforcement. What went wrong the first time and what made the difference the second time?

A. At first I asked for way too much. I asked for summaries of each case on disk. I asked for criminal data, too, which was incomplete. I got a few disks and tried (to analyze them) for months back and forth with EPA officials who prepared the disks. I was looking to see if there was a trend on who was enforced, not just enforcement. If I had the time, patience and computer know-how (EPA insists on using out-of-date WordPerfect files), I may

Enforcement who was extremely helpful. We talked back and forth for a couple of months. I explained what I needed. He explained what he had, and then we tried to mesh the two. The guy was fantastic to work with. Eventually, he ran internal computer programs and sent me two inches of paper with summaries.

The only glitch was, at first, he sent some figures based on fiscal years and some based on calendar years and some that were hard to tell the difference. Eventually, he re-did them at my request to all fiscal years (except NOV's which luckily he had by calendar month so that was even better). I then painstakingly put them on an Excel spreadsheet so I could get a better trend look. Using Excel, I was able to take quarterly figures and find yearly trends, trends by administration.

The fiscal quarter begins Jan. 1, 2001, so there were a couple weeks of poorly applied credit, but not much. Given that I had 33 months of Bush II data I felt that I had enough data to see a trend. I let Excel point out trends and do the math. Then I took that Excel spreadsheet and created a summary Word document.

One other thing, on the dollar amount, I went year by year and converted them to 2003 dollars using an on-line inflation adjusting calculator.

Q. How did you analyze them?

A. I looked for trends by year, by administration and by law. I looked for record-low months and compared them to record-high months.

Q. What were the most surprising things you found?

A. That the first Bush administration did the most enforcement by far. It confirms a long-time feeling that the Bill Reilly EPA never got the credit that it deserved.

Q. OK, now you have numbers, what do you do with them?

A. I wanted them explained. Seeing that they made Bush I EPA look good, I decided that they would be good people to talk to. It also makes a story better if it is Republicans criticizing Republicans because then it seems less about politics and more about results and good government. I talked to past enforcement chiefs — Sylvia Lowrance of Bush II, Steve Herman of Clinton and James Strock of Bush I, Stan Legro of Ford.

I talked to several other ranking EPA officials, former EPA administrators Bill Reilly of Bush I and Russell Train of Nixon/Ford, as well as Dan Esty of Yale and former regional deputy chief Dave Ullrich.

I knew Sylvia and Dan as well as Bill Reilly and Russell Train. I had to use EPA history website to find out who some of these people were and Google searches to find previous enforcement chiefs. But they were pretty easy to find. I also just asked people who I should talk to.

The Bush I people I approached about how good they did, why it was important and why things changed. Bill Reilly and James Strock would not outright criticize Bush II administration, but they explained why it was important and that helped with story. Then others did the criticizing.

Through these people — Republicans and Democrats — I found current enforcement people who would talk not-for-attribution about what was going on in the administration.

Q. The strength of your story was not only documenting those downward trends, but also getting former officials to comment on them, many of them Republicans. Did you

already have a long-standing relationship with those former officials?

A. There are a number of moderate Republican environmental officials who dislike what this administration is doing. They feel tarred by this administration and with a little pushing and prodding, you can get them to say so. I highly recommend Russ Train. What many reporters forget is that Richard Nixon and George H.W. Bush signed some of the most landmark environmental laws in existence.

Q. You told me you love number stories. Most reporters are turned off by numbers. What turns you on about them?

A. With numbers, you don't have the he-said, she-said spin of giving both sides. Numbers are numbers. This is a city (Washington, D.C.) of spin, but numbers give you a sense of trust that rhetoric doesn't. After I spend a lot of time with numbers, I feel more comfortable that I know what I'm talking about. I know that sounds silly, but numbers give me a warm-fuzzy. And in press conferences, I almost always ask number questions. You can trip people up or cut to the chase with numbers.

For example, one of the best ways of illustrating global warming is to point out this: The five hottest years on record all have occurred since 1997, and the 10 hottest since 1990. It's been 221 months since the world recorded a colder-than-normal month.

Yes, you can warp numbers in many ways, but if you approach numbers well they lead down a wonderful path in some vicinity of the truth.

Also, too many reporters are afraid of numbers, so I feel it gives me a competitive advantage to know numbers, spreadsheets, and data analysis.

The key is to not overuse numbers in a story so an editor's or reader's eyes glaze over. I haven't quite mastered that. I usually write up what I want and then try to limit each paragraph to no more than three or four numerals. But my editors still say I'm too number-oriented.

Q. How did EPA react?

A. They tried to pre-empt the story. First, I confronted new

There are a number of moderate Republican environmental officials who dislike what this administration is doing. They feel tarred by this administration and with a little pushing and prodding you can get them to say so... What many reporters forget is that Richard Nixon and George H.W. Bush signed some of the most landmark environmental laws in existence.

(Continued next page)

EPA enforcement... (from page 19)

EPA chief Mike Leavitt in our initial get-acquainted interview and got vague stuff from him. It was usable, but not good. That put EPA on notice about what I had and where I was going. Then I told EPA that I wanted enforcement chief J.P. Suarez to talk about this. Leavitt said EPA was about to come up with its own numbers...so I had to hurry. On a Friday, I said I wanted to talk to Suarez by Tuesday for a story to run Wednesday. Over the weekend, EPA tried to hurry and pre-empt my story with its own numbers. On Saturday, a rare workday here in Washington, EPA's legislative liaison emailed some Capitol Hill people that they wanted to hurry up with a briefing on the issue on Tuesday so they could release their numbers that day. (Strange coincidence on timing, huh?)

I found out. So by Monday afternoon, I told EPA my story would run Tuesday.

They cried foul and said they couldn't get Suarez for me Monday. I said tough, you tried to screw me over, so this is what happens. They said they couldn't get the numbers together for their planned Tuesday press release, so could I wait. My editors and I agreed that we couldn't trust them given what they did and when we heard what they planned to do, so we let our papers know the story was coming.

We told EPA the story was running Tuesday no matter what and they had only their own conniving to blame. At 5:15 p.m., they gave me Suarez on the phone and I inserted his explanations.

He said NOVs don't matter. Strangely enough, everyone else told me just the opposite.

Q. What were some of the repercussions of your story? Did it spur new tips?

A. First, EPA went out on a public relations blitz with their numbers, but luckily there were few takers. Three top EPA

enforcement people — including Suarez — quit in December. A couple of them — not Suarez — said it was because they were not being allowed to enforce new source review. In January, EPA took the unusual action of finally enforcing new source review.

Tips, I got tips. I'm looking at other federal agency enforcement. Unfortunately, I have to learn the lingo and minutiae there, unlike knowing EPA from the beginning. I could spend months just looking at Bush enforcement policies and just may.

Borenstein's story can be found at: http://www.realcities.com/mld/krwashington/news/columnists/seth_borenstein/7445045.htm

Borenstein has been a national correspondent for Knight Ridder's Washington bureau since June 1998. He covers environment, science, space, public health, disasters, aviation "and Santa Claus," he says. "I really did a story on the science of Santa just after my enforcement piece."

Before joining Knight Ridder's Washington bureau, he covered NASA for the *Orlando Sentinel*, and hurricanes, disasters, environment and city government for the *Sun-Sentinel* in Fort Lauderdale. He has worked at the *Daily News* of Newburyport, Mass., covering city hall and editor of the now-defunct *Belmont Citizen*, a weekly in the Boston suburbs.

He went to Boston University and was graduated with a bachelors of science degree in journalism. He and his wife have three children and he is the cubmaster for Pack 460 in Kensington, Md.

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

James Bruggers wins Stokes Award for Louisville air-quality series

By **MIKE MANSUR**

James Bruggers, *The Louisville Courier-Journal's* environmental reporter, won the National Press Foundation's 2003 Thomas L. Stokes Award for his series of stories last year about toxic air pollution in Louisville.

"Jim deserves all the credit in the world for his work on this project," said Bennie L. Ivory, executive editor of *The Courier-Journal*.

Bruggers is a long-time member of the Society of Environmental Journalists and past president of the SEJ board and a current board member.

The National Press Foundation cited Bruggers' work as "an example of enterprising journalism. He fought the bureaucracy to get important information and his work produced official action and positive results."

Bruggers conducted an independent analysis of air-monitoring data collected by the University of Louisville for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and a community task force. The newspaper found 18 chemicals or compounds in Louisville-area air at concentrations that were higher than what local, state and federal environmental regulators considered safe — hundreds of times higher at some of the air monitors.

The highest readings were in western Louisville near the Rubbertown complex of chemical plants. Subsequent coverage reported that cancer and other health risks from breathing Louisville-area air are higher than the EPA had previously estimated for anywhere in the nation.

Other stories looked at other health concerns and the economic consequences of the pollution.

Shortly after the first stories were published, Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson persuaded three companies to pledge voluntary air-pollution reductions.

Those companies and a fourth have since put their commitments in writing.

The Louisville Metro Air Pollution Control Board in January adopted a resolution calling for local environmental officials to draw up a new program for regulating toxic emissions — one that would go beyond the minimum federal requirements that are now in place.

The EPA has begun full inspections of all 11 Rubbertown companies and has agreed to assist the local air pollution control district in reducing hazardous air pollutants.

Mike Mansur edits the SEJournal.

CAR... (from page 1)

At the *Star Tribune*, Nixon maintains about 40 databases on everything from property data to criminal information. All staff members have access to it, but he, head news librarian Bob Jansen and assistant librarian Sandy Date do their best to help reporters make use of what's available.

"It's not always readily available and clear," Nixon says, "so you sort of have to go out and look through the stuff and connect this thing to that thing."

Nixon believes reporters gain a huge advantage by going right to the primary data to answer questions, a belief reinforced many times during his tenure in Roanoke. He cited another example.

"The state sent out a press release saying pollution had decreased," Nixon says. "I got the data base and added it up myself; I think it was off about 2 million pounds or so. It reinforced the idea that it's good to get the data yourself, rather than a written report from an agency telling what they want you to know."

How government agencies disseminate data has changed dramatically in the past five to 10 years. Nixon uses the example of census data. After the 1990 U.S. Census was released, news organizations needed about six months to analyze the numbers and produce stories. When the 2000 Census data came out, Nixon downloaded the entire data set into his computer at the *Star Tribune*, a standard desktop machine with add-on disc drives for storage. Within days, reporters were churning out stories.

Nixon adds that e-mail allows data to change hands easily. If it isn't online, an exchange of messages often will produce it.

"Some of it comes in text files that you import into (Microsoft) Excel, some of it comes in databases," he says.

Environmental data is particularly rich, Nixon says, with state agencies often providing a wealth of numbers beyond what's on federal sites.

Nixon keeps his information on an array of disk drives attached to his computer at the *Star Tribune*, a mark of how the world of data storage has changed. In 1991 a typical desktop disk drive might have held 100 megabytes; gigabyte drives cost several thousand dollars. Today a 120-gigabyte drive costs about \$150, and devices measured in terabytes — trillions of bits of information — are on the horizon.

The availability of compact disk burners stretches this storage capacity into infinity. Nixon backs up all of the *Star Tribune's* data bases on his home computer and on CDs.

"I believe in redundancy," Nixon says.

This trove of numbers is available through the *Star Tribune's* intranet. News librarians help out reporters by setting up predefined queries, but the raw data is there for any reporter who docks a laptop in the newsroom.

"We do a lot of work on the back end and the front end to make things easier," librarian Bob Jansen says.

Nixon relies on database software such as Microsoft's Access and FoxPro for information retrieval; these programs often come bundled with a new computer. Database software allows the user to search, sort and combine information.

A reporter can use spreadsheet or statistical software to search for patterns. One approach is "connect the dots" journalism, where information takes on new meaning through cross-referencing of two databases.

Spreadsheets today are capable of dealing with data sets of a

million records or more. Programs such as Microsoft Excel offer a full set of statistical functions. (For more information on using spreadsheets for environmental stories, see *SEJournal* archives for Russ Clemings' two-part primer on Excel, published Summer and Fall 2003. The archives are available to SEJ members at www.sej.org.)

Nixon prefers software designed for statistical analysis, powerful tools for "data mining" through cross-tabulation — gender by income, as a simple example. Statistical software can perform complicated analyses beyond the capabilities of a spreadsheet, such as multiple regression. These programs also have powerful graphing functions.

Statistical programs allow the user to import data as symbolic link (SYLK) files, a standard that spreadsheet programs also can handle.

One of the more popular programs, SPSS, has been around since the 1970s, when the mainframe computer ruled. Nixon has used it often.

But Nixon prefers a similar program, SAS/STATS. It has a steeper learning curve, but Nixon says it's like "SPSS on steroids." Nixon notes that SAS/STATS has a theoretical limit of "trillions of records," meaning that practically speaking, it has no upper limit.

These programs allow the journalist to reduce millions of individual records into meaningful aggregate data: tables and charts that reveal newsworthy relationships. The software available to reporters can do this quickly, if they know what they want.

Nixon, who began as a music major in college, believes any reporter can use statistics effectively with a little training. Like most newspapers of its size, the *Star Tribune* offers workshops on computer-assisted reporting.

While *Star Tribune* reporters have Nixon to guide them through this forest of numbers, a reporter at a small newspaper or a freelancer can find help through NICAR (www.nicar.org). It maintains a database library that members can access for a fee as needed. Its collection includes government data on hazardous materials, "events" involving nuclear materials and an inventory of dams, to name a few.

NICAR puts on week-long "CAR Boot Camps" at the University of Missouri about five times a year, with fellowships available. Nixon has taught some of these sessions.

The Poynter Institute for Media Studies (www.poynter.org) devotes a whole section of its Web site to CAR.

Despite Nixon's intense use of computers and databases on which to build stories, the backbone of any good story still will be good, old-fashioned story telling. In reporting on the Virginia Department of Forestry, Nixon and his colleague used the data to shed light on a growing problem in the state and to make a state agency accountable.

"You want to be able to use this stuff for stories," Nixon says. "This is not about computer science. It's about using this stuff to write better stories. Sometimes people get carried away with doing something for the sake of doing it."

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Mercury... (from page 15)

The Bush Administration is recommending dropping EPA's laborious effort to set mercury emissions limits under the law's prescriptive

“What I can predict with almost absolute certainty is that, if this EPA proposal is promulgated close to its original language, you will see an onslaught of actions at the state and local levels to replace or strengthen EPA's program. These programs will vary widely in scope and magnitude and it will drive the industry nuts.”

— S. William Becker,
*Association of Local Air
Pollution Control Officials*

Section 112 provisions, which govern maximum achievable control technology or MACT standards. Instead, EPA wants to create a cap-and-trade program under a totally different, untested part of the law — Section 111, which has been used primarily to regulate less-toxic new sources of pollution.

The Bush administration's unique interpretation of the law immediately came under attack. Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., who was a principle author of the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments, wrote a letter to Leavitt arguing that “abrupt policy shifts that appear after more than 13 years of agency effort do little to improve the public's confidence in EPA's ultimate decision-making apparatus.” The most searing assessment

of the mercury plan came from the Clean Energy Group, a coalition of progressive electric companies: “The number of legal questions the proposals raise makes them look more like a law school exam question (with a premium on the number of legal booby traps that the student can identify) than proposed regulations,” the group's analysis said.

Some state officials contend that EPA's mercury controls will trigger more utility regulations on the state level. “What I can predict with almost absolute certainty is that, if this EPA proposal is promulgated close to its original language, you will see an onslaught of actions at the state and local levels to replace or strengthen EPA's program,” said S. William Becker, executive director of the State and Territorial Air Pollution Program Administrators and of the Association of Local Air Pollution Control Officials. “These programs will vary widely in scope and magnitude and it will drive the industry nuts,” he predicted.

Leavitt asserts that the mercury proposal is taking a beating because the debate is being held during a politically volatile presidential election year. “Others have the luxury of dealing with mercury in a political way,” he said. “I have an obligation to deal with it in a factual way.”

But EPA critics say the controversy could grow in political importance because mercury impacts the health of pregnant women and small children in several key states. According to a report by Environmental Defense, an environmental advocacy group, the states suffering from the worst mercury hot spots (in declining order) are: Indiana, Michigan, Maryland, Florida, Illinois, South Carolina, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Tennessee. Several of those states are expected to be battleground states in the 2000 presidential election. Environmentalists assert that citizens in those states are more likely to pay attention to the debate over mercury limits and to accusations that Bush sides with the electric industry rather than public health.

Ken Colburn, executive director of the Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management, an association of air quality agencies, argues that the mercury debate is catching public attention because it focuses on the age-old conflict between economics and public health.

“The problem, of course, is that every year those plants run without controls is another year of better cash flow for the utilities,” he said. “And it's another year of mercury pollution accumulating in our waterways and poisoning our children.”

Margie Kriz (mkriz@nationaljournal.com) covers the environment for the National Journal in Washington, D.C..

SEJ president wins reporting award at 2004 AAAS meeting in Seattle

By JOANN M. VALENTI

Valentine's Day was not the same with the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in the city best known for the \$3 cup of coffee and all of your Microsoft headaches. That according to the city's mayor as he welcomed an estimated 5,000 scientists and 1000 science journalists to Seattle.

AAAS researchers converged to talk about how dogs evolved from a lone wolf, oceans are in peril, global warming still threatens and marital bliss can be

predicted using a mathematical formula. South Korea grabbed initial headlines with its announcement of human embryonic cloning. Three cloned mules from Idaho came in a close second.

AAAS Science Journalism Awards were presented to Dan Fagin of *Newsday*, Nadia White of the *Casper Star Tribune* (Wyoming), David Duncan of *Wired Magazine*, Renata Simone of WGBH/*Frontline World*, David Kestenbaum of National Public Radio, and Daniel Grossman of WBUR.org.

Fagin, print winner for large newspapers, received the award for his July 2003 three-part series, “Tattered Hopes,” reporting on breast cancer and pollution on Long Island.

More on the conference can be found at <http://www.aaas.org>.

JoAnn Valenti is secretary of the AAAS Section on General Interest in Science & Engineering and an emeritus professor at Brigham Young University.

Asbestos, cougars and wilderness, and a California kingpin

Reporters nail story on asbestos dangers

AN AIR THAT KILLS: HOW THE ASBESTOS POISONING OF LIBBY, MONTANA, UNCOVERED A NATIONAL SCANDAL
 By Andrew Schneider and David McCumber
 G.P. Putnam's Sons, \$25.95

By CHRIS BOWMAN

You've been on the road for weeks, wrapping up a yearlong investigation on public land mining. The project was supposed to have been published by now. Editor angst is high. No more extensions.

But, wait. This tip just in: Many people in the tiny town of Libby, Mont. are falling sick and dying because of a now-closed mine — on private land.

The story — if it is a story — honestly doesn't fit the series. Besides, nothing in the clips suggests the tip is true. Beyond that, Libby is 440 miles outside your readership zone. I know what many editors would say.

Fortunately, David McCumber, managing editor of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, agreed that investigative reporter Andrew Schneider should dash to Libby — project deadlines be damned. The results of that decision played out in the newspaper's 1999 series, "A Town Left to Die."

In the book, McCumber brings his considerable writing talent to the Libby story. And Schneider, now at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, includes his more recent reporting on asbestos found in everyday consumer products from crayons to tampons and on asbestos in the fallout of the World Trade Center collapse.

The book truly squares with its provocative title. The authors are the first to chronicle one of the worst environmental health disasters in modern America, a catastrophe still unfolding and still unknown to the public at large. They don't tell you it's a tragedy spawned by corporate greed and government indifference. Schneider's exhaustive reporting shows it, and the stunning memos he obtained nails it. Their work should be placed on the same shelves as the books on the better-known environmental disasters of Love Canal, Times Beach and the childhood cancer cluster in Woburn, Mass.

McCumber, by the way, didn't send Schneider on a 200-mile detour to Montana's northwestern corner on blind faith. He learned to trust the instincts of his reporter, one with two Pulitzer prizes to his name. Still, how could dozens of miners and several of their wives and children have died from mineral dust without environmental and public health officials knowing about it? The question kept Schneider digging. And it keeps readers of *An Air that Kills* turning pages.

The asbestos originated at a strip mine seven miles outside the blue-collar town of Libby, population 8,000. For 66 years, miners unearthed and milled vermiculite, a sparkling mineral used in products from insulation to soil conditioning. Millions of tons of vermiculite were shipped by rail from Libby to manufacturers across the country. W.R. Grace & Co. bought the mine from Zonolite Co. in 1963 and closed it in 1990, citing econom-

ic reasons. Over the years, more than 2,000 workers earned their living "on the hill," as they called it.

The dynamiting, shoveling, crushing and screening generated billowing clouds of "nuisance dust," as Grace officials called it. The mining also liberated cancer-causing fibers from asbestos minerals that occur in the veins of the same Libby ore containing the non-toxic vermiculite. Grace internal records obtained by Schneider, and reporters such as me who followed his footsteps, make it clear that company officials chose not to disclose the potential hazard to its workers and to the millions of customers who bought its asbestos-tainted products. (One of them, called Zonolite, is a loose fill insulation that millions of do-it-yourselfers poured between rafters and inside the walls of their homes.)

Miners with asbestos-related diseases are not exactly news. Tens of thousands of people in the United States have died as result of their exposure to the asbestos on jobs, including mechanics who worked on car brakes and insulation workers. And the twin themes of bureaucratic inaction and corporate cover-ups are the stuff of many journalistic investigations-turned-books. The big discovery to come out of Libby is that asbestos, a convicted killer, is still at large in the United States.

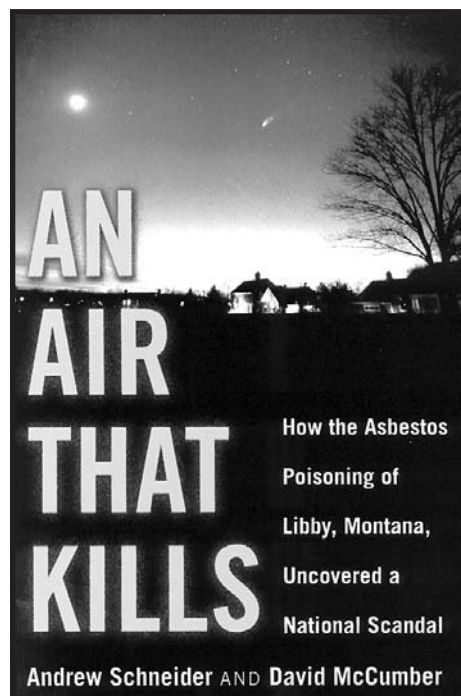
Schneider and McCumber detail how a refreshingly bold EPA Emergency Response Team busts a series of faulty assumptions about the toxic air contaminant: Government officials assumed asbestos exposures in Libby ended with the closing and reclamation of the vermiculite mine. Wrong. The EPA team's tests showed the stuff on the surface of the high school running track, the community baseball fields, in the gardens and in the insulation of many homes.

Federal officials ended up taking thousands of air and soil samples to check for on-going exposure and conducted emergency medical screening of 6,000 current and former residents of the Libby area.

Other faulty assumptions:

- All forms of asbestos are equally potent. Wrong. The contaminant in the Libby vermiculite is a rare type of asbestos called "tremolite," which most experts consider

(Continued next page)



to be many times more toxic than the commercially used “chrysotile” type in causing mesothelioma (mees-o-thee-lee-o-ma) — a cancer of the membranes lining the chest and other body cavities. The EPA team discovered that the agency’s risk models and techniques for sampling and analyzing asbestos didn’t work for tremolite.

- People at high risk of asbestos-related disease are limited to those who mined it, handled it and otherwise were exposed to the mineral fibers on the job for many years. Wrong, again. Episodic exposures to tremolite, such as from shaking the dust off the miners’ overalls is enough to do you in decades later. What really tortures the ailing Libby miners is knowing that the dust they tracked home from work probably caused the same disease now afflicting their wives and grown children.

- In the United States, asbestos is no longer used in consumer products. Wrong. In 1989, the EPA banned the manufacture, importation, processing and selling of almost all products containing asbestos. Two years later, however, the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans overturned the regulations. Hundreds of products on the market still contain asbestos.

The authors’ depictions of key Libby residents and EPA officials are precisely as I remember them from my interviews for a story in the *Sacramento Bee*. And their decision to include Schneider’s reporting journey in the story adds to the book’s credibility. Schneider demystifies the reporting process. He describes how far he went for good detail, as when he toured rooftops near the World Trade Center wreckage with a scientist who said she was afraid of heights.

“The reporter (Schneider) wrapped one end of her safety rope around his waist as she leaned much too far trying to scrape dust samples from cornices and the heads and wings of two gargoyles.”

The authors also describe how the Seattle newspaper conducted its own asbestos sampling and how and where it obtained

records. A Zonolite plant superintendent’s view about telling customers of the product’s asbestos content is especially illuminating.

“To tell the public about a potential hazard — that’s what it is, a potential hazard — is kind of asinine,” the superintendent said in his 1991 deposition. He added, “It’s bad for business.”

Chris Bowman of the Sacramento Bee has been reporting on the dangers of tremolite asbestos since 1998.



Uneasy on the edge of wilderness

THE BEAST IN THE GARDEN

By David Baron

W.W. Norton and Company, \$24.95

By AMY GAHRAN

In his first book, “The Beast in the Garden,” David Baron weaves a remarkably compelling tale from disparate threads of interviews, journalism, history, politics, and science. How compelling? Let’s put it this way... I started reading “Beast in the Garden” when I was 50 pages into the top-selling thriller, “The DaVinci Code.” I completely lost all interest in “DaVinci” until I concluded “Beast”.

“Beast in the Garden” tells the story of cougars in Colorado’s populous Front Range. How, decades after being hunted virtually to extinction, they prowled back into a vastly changed landscape and adapted to it in unforeseen ways. Gradually these cats grew accustomed to the presence of man. This trend eventually led to the tragic death of 18-year-old athlete Scott Lancaster in a 1991 cougar attack.

Without ever losing a powerful sense of storytelling, Baron effectively conveys a heated debate that arose in the scientific and wildlife management communities that began in the 1980s. At that time, two Colorado cougar experts, Jim Halfpenny and Michael Sanders, proposed that cougars in the Boulder region

(Continued next page)

Pittsburgh... (from page 7)

famous mill where an army of Pinkertons battled striking steelworkers in 1892. In the day-long gun battle, three Pinkertons and seven steelworkers were killed and many more wounded. A new Target store is part of the redevelopment of the old brown-field site.

Other tours will sample water on Pittsburgh’s rivers, tour one of the longest-operating bird-banding facilities in the East (more than 500,000 banded) and check out the bicycling on the Great Allegheny Passage.

Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater and Kentuck Knob homes will undoubtedly be a popular tour highlighting early environmental architecture, as will one that visits Rachel Carson’s family homestead in Springdale and the Rachel Carson Institute at Chatham College, her alma mater.

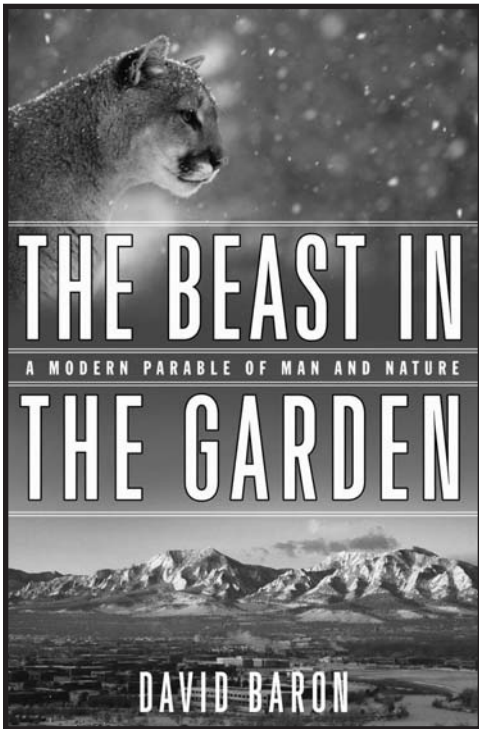
A post-conference tour will explore the upper Allegheny River’s wild and scenic designated sections and tour the Allegheny National Forest’s old growth and wilderness areas.

The conference will also make use of many of Pittsburgh’s most distinctive attractions. On Thursday evening we’ll visit the Carnegie Museum, where we’ll nosh and sip wine in Dinosaur Hall, one of the biggest skeletal collections in the world. Saturday we will visit the city’s convention center — the nation’s largest “green” building — and cruise the rivers. Sunday’s getaway event will be held at the Andy Warhol Museum.

So watch your mailbox for more information and check SEJ’s website at www.sej.org for the latest updates on conference events. And look for your conference brochure in the mail, sometime in April. Remember, the early registrant gets the choice tours. Seating is limited.

Don Hopey is environment reporter at The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, SEJ board member and chair of the 2004 annual conference.

appeared to be losing their longstanding fear of dogs and humans and changing their hunting and activity patterns to pose a greater threat to people who lived in the Front Range.



But Baron doesn't hand the reader anything on a silver platter. He crafts his tale artfully, drawing the reader in deeper and deeper with well-chosen details and rich, vivid language honed by his years as a National Public Radio reporter. He describes public meetings, historical background, wildlife biology, and grip-

ping chase and attack scenes all with a flair that puts you right in the midst of the action. Before you know it, you're grasping the larger issue of how species on the edge of a fluctuating wilderness boundary can behave in unpredictable ways. Best of all, Baron refuses to offer simplistic good guys and bad guys. Every person (and animal) included in this story has understandable and complex motives, strengths, and blind spots. This book is stunningly real, but not sensationalistic, and never dry for a moment.

I have lived in Boulder nearly a decade, and I love the mountains. But I feel that in reading Baron's book, I have finally truly begun to understand and appreciate the ecosystem of which I am a part, and how it continues to evolve rapidly.

Amy Gahrn is a freelancer and publisher of the e-zine Contentious.



A study in power reveals California kingpin

THE KING OF CALIFORNIA: J.G. BOSWELL AND THE MAKING OF A SECRET AMERICAN EMPIRE

By **Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman**
 PublicAffairs Books, \$30.

By **STUART LEAVENWORTH**

It is hardly news that California is a dysfunctional state, whipsawed by natural disasters and political implosions, such as the recent election of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

But now comes the revelation that the state's leading kingpin is a Corcoran cracker who pisses on his lawn and runs vast farming empires from an armpit in the Central Valley.

J.G. Boswell II is the subject of Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman's book, "The King of California," which reads like a California version of "Gone with the Wind." Arax and Wartzman, who work for *The Los Angeles Times*, spent six years poring through archives and ingratiating themselves with reluctant sources. The result is a compelling narrative that carries you from the California cotton belt to the Gucci gulch of Capitol Hill.

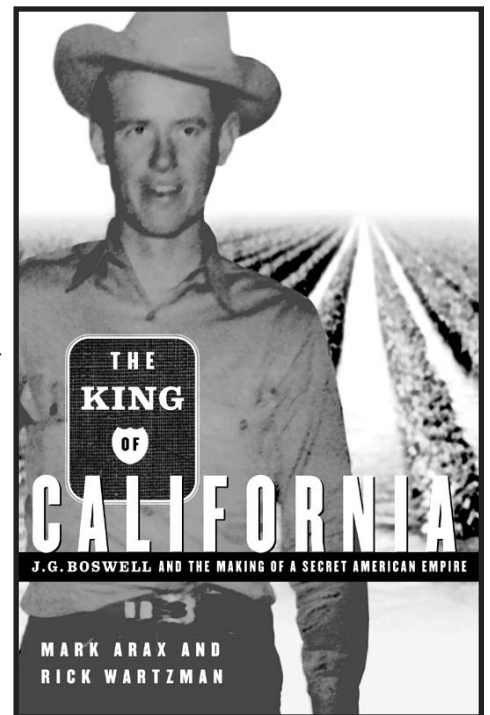
A slave-holding family from Georgia, the Boswells moved to the southern San Joaquin Valley in the early 1920s, drained Tulare Lake, planted cotton, exploited cheap labor and ran off union organizers. They survived overflowing rivers, helped by politicians who delivered the goodies in the form of subsidized irrigation and flood-control projects. They created new markets for cotton, and pioneered new technologies for growing and processing it.

There are lots of characters in this tale, such Clarence "Cockeye" Salter, a rival grower who battled both the Boswells and his own family. But the biggest personality is James Griffin Boswell II, now 80, who took over the business from his uncle.

A hard-driving competitor and wisecracker with a taste for Jack Daniels, Boswell is an enigma in California. Few journalists have ever talked to him. Through dogged persistence, the authors convinced Boswell to consent to a few interviews. At the end of a particularly tense session, the King of California unzipped his fly to relieve himself.

This book's focus is not the environment. Arax and Wartzman note how the Boswell family drained the Tulare basin and exposed farm workers to pesticides. But there is little mention of how they depleted aquifers, or contributed to the valley's growing air pollution. The authors are more interested in the raw exercise of power and the audacious vision that created riches out of a wasteland.

Here in Sacramento, "The King of California" is stirring plenty of buzz. Some call the title hyperbole. Others see it as either a



hatchet job or too admiring of the Boswells. My take: This is an impressively balanced book on an elusive and legendary family. It will go up on my California bookshelf, right next to non-fiction classics by Carey McWilliams, Mark Reisner and Joan Didion.

Stuart Leavenworth is natural resources reporter at The Sacramento Bee.

Peer review... (from page 10)

them. It is headed by John D. Graham, a former Harvard professor who is a lightning rod for criticism from many in the environmental and public health communities.

On the surface, OMB's plan may seem like a non-controversial idea — peer review is generally viewed as a positive thing. Yet the proposal has generated a tremendous amount of debate, mainly pitting scientific professional organizations against industry groups. In addition, a group of former federal regulators, including EPA administrators under presidents Bill Clinton and Richard Nixon, are calling for OMB to scrap the peer review proposal and draft a new one after consultations with scientists and others.

The bottom line for many critics is that the proposal would slow down the pace of federal regulation and give industry increased influence in agencies' scientific analyses. Industry, meanwhile, says its input is critical into peer review so agencies will base their regulations on the soundest science possible.

Scientific groups broadly embrace the idea of peer review for government science, but many are deeply worried about the White House proposal. As it drafted the plan, OMB, known for economic and policy analyses, did not consult any scientific organization, not even the prestigious National Academy of Sciences (NAS), which is chartered to give technical advice to the government. The academy is concerned that the OMB plan is so prescriptive that it would actually prohibit agencies from seeking NAS reviews of their scientific assessments. Many scientific professional organizations and NAS are strongly opposed to a provision that would generally prohibit any researcher who has gotten grant money from an agency from serving as a peer reviewer for that arm of the government.

The Ecological Society of America says this ban would particularly hurt EPA because many of the scientists with the expertise that agency needs for its peer reviews have gotten EPA funding for research projects.

Some critics contend that the plan, unveiled in late August 2003, would shift power away from federal agencies who hold

expertise in a particular field, say environment or drug safety, to OMB. In emergency situations that threaten human health or the environment, agencies would not be able to take regulatory action without waiting months for completion of a formal peer review — unless they get special dispensation from OMB. This means that if studies show a drug has harmful side effects, the Food and Drug Administration could not stop its sales unless OMB grants a waiver to peer review requirements. Critics strenuously oppose the concentration of health and safety agencies' emergency powers into the office of the White House's regulatory gatekeepers.

The plan has its fans. Supporters include industry groups ranging from the American Chemistry Council, the trade association of major chemical producers, to the National Association of Funeral Home Directors, which represents small businesses. They see OMB's peer review as another avenue to weigh in with their views on scientific evidence under scrutiny — science that will lead to regulation of their industries. In fact, many industry groups are recommending that OMB give the public (which includes them) a chance to comment on the selection of peer reviewers, to present their views on the science to peer review panels, and to have access to all the documents that agencies supply to peer reviewers.

When OMB released the draft peer review guidance, Graham said, "The goal is fewer lawsuits and a more consistent regulatory environment." But some believe the draft policy would trigger more lawsuits against environmental and safety rules by giving interest groups another part of the regulatory process — peer review — to attack in court as faulty.

The numerous and extensive comments the White House received on its peer review proposal show that a lot is at stake. Some groups offered detailed legal arguments for establishing and expanding the plan. Others provided sophisticated policy analyses contending that the peer review proposal fails OMB's own cost-benefit standards for federal regulations.

OMB likely did not expect that its plan would generate such extensive debate. The office has postponed its deadline for issuing a final version of the peer review guidance from February until sometime later in 2004 — it is vague about when. But whether OMB will seek input from those most intimately familiar with peer review — scientific organizations — as it crafts the final policy remains to be seen.

See "White House Seeks Control on Health, Safety" by Andrew Schneider, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jan. 11, 2004; "Peer Review Plan Draws Criticism" by Rick Weiss, *Washington Post*, Jan. 15, 2004; and "Brouhaha Over Peer Review" by Cheryl Hogue, *Chemical & Engineering News*, Feb. 2, 2004.

Cheryl Hogue covers environmental issues for Chemical & Engineering News, the weekly newsmagazine of the American Chemical Society (ACS), the world's largest scientific professional organization devoted to a single discipline. ACS has not taken a position on OMB's federal peer review plan. Her email: c_hogue@acs.org.

Sewage, sludge and tainted water in the news

By MIKE DUNNE

Flushing a toilet is a common activity for everyone and looking to see what happens on the other end — after it has all conveniently disappeared — can be the source of a good story in just about every community.

Environmental reporters wrote lots of stories in the last quarter about sewage and sewage sludge.

Much of it was prompted by a report from the National Academy of Sciences on the potential public health risks of sewage sludge land applications. It is available at <http://www.nap.edu/books/0309084865/html/>

The Great Lakes Radio Consortium reported Jan. 13 that U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said it's ready to take a new look at the status of the science and the risks involved in using treated human waste — sewage sludge — as fertilizer on farmland. That's seen as good news for people who live near farms using sewage sludge. Some of them say the sludge makes them sick.

Jim Hooks of the Chambersburg, Pa., *Public Opinion* reported on Dec. 30 that recent state and federal courts rulings have sent a mixed message on whether municipalities can regulate spreading of treated human waste, also known as biosolids, on land. Under pressure from residents worried that biosolids may lead to health problems, several townships have sought to regulate the practice beyond what state law requires.

Three court cases — two in Pennsylvania and a third in Virginia — struck down parts of local ordinances regulating land application of biosolids. The cases also upheld other parts.

On Feb. 2, Carol Benfell of the Santa Rosa, Calif., *Press Democrat* reported about how one small town was handling its sewage problems. The town of Grafton is expected to begin raising a redwood forest with the wastewater. The idea was hatched by Marta Williams, 53, a biologist and a Grafton resident. She worked for 13 years to free Grafton's plant from the Sonoma County Water Agency and control its own destiny.

In December, Williams' fellow residents voted 5 to 1 to form their own community

services district. The existing plant will be locally owned and operated, and wastewater will be used to irrigate redwoods and nursery stock instead of discharged into the Russian River.

In January, Elizabeth Bluemink of the *Pensacola News Journal* wrote about federal and state environmental regulators increasing their scrutiny of a plan to send treated paper mill and sewage waste over land that drains into Perdido Bay.

The narrow bay, shared by Florida and southern Alabama, is a victim of industrial and urban pollution, Bluemink wrote. For a decade, the state has allowed a bleach paper mill in central Escambia County, now owned by International Paper Co., to operate under an expired permit and violate water rules for a major tributary of the bay, Eleven Mile Creek.

International Paper and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection have a controversial \$85 million remedy in mind. It involves a 10-mile pipeline and a natural wetlands-disposal system, a method that has never been used by a U.S. paper mill.

The EPA will take the unusual step of evaluating the details of the proposed project before the state completes its own review, primarily because of the potential impact on Perdido Bay.

In the midst of this scrutiny, Florida's top environmental official, David Struhs, is taking a high-level job at International Paper.

On Jan. 24, *Louisville Courier-Journal* reporter Joe Follick wrote that despite paying more than \$250 million in recent years to keep raw sewage out of rivers and streams, Louisville and Jefferson County Metropolitan Sewer District customers may have to dig even deeper for a potential \$1-billion-plus overhaul ordered by the federal government.

While an order from the EPA is probably years away, customers could expect higher rates and some torn-up streets, Follick wrote.

MSD Executive Director Bud Schardein said that years of work on the sewer system "won't likely be enough ... (EPA) will set the schedule and the cost will be borne by MSD's customers." Those rates could increase by more than \$100 a month in some cases, Follick wrote.

More than 9 billion gallons of untreated waste water flowed into rivers and streams in the past five years, usually during heavy rain events when treatment facilities can't handle the combined volume of rainwater and sewage. Old sewers, a lack of pumps and other factors help cause the overflows.

Carla Crowder of the *Birmingham News* reported in early January that two Alabama prisons were dumping raw sewage into creeks in violation of federal clean water standards.

State corrections officials said they do not have money for major repairs needed to stop the pollution long term. Donaldson Correctional Facility located in western Jefferson County is polluting the Big Branch Creek, a tributary to the Black Warrior River. And St. Clair Correctional Facility, near Springville, is polluting the Little Canoe Creek, Deputy Corrections Commissioner Terence Jones told the legislature's Joint Prison Committee.

Other stories this winter focused on what flows into homes.

Joshua Partlow of the *Washington Post* reported on Feb. 8 that elevated levels of radiation were found in the groundwater of one Charles County subdivision, Chapel Point Woods. Four months ago residents were told that radiation three times above the federal standards was detected in their water system, which comes from three wells in the Patapsco aquifer.

In 1992, and again in 1999, the average radiation level was 8 picocuries per liter of gross alpha radiation, but last year it was 43, according to Richard McIntire, a spokesman for the Maryland Department of the Environment.

"We don't understand why we saw the levels increase so dramatically," McIntire said. "This is a bona fide mystery."

Partlow's story said the elevated levels were found during routine water-quality tests of the well system, which is run by Charles County. In September, the state issued a notice of violation to the county for exceeding the federal threshold of 15 picocuries per liter of gross alpha radiation, McIntire said.

Radiation wasn't the only problem
(Continued next page)

The Beat... (from page 27)

found in *The Washington Post's* circulation area. David Nakamura reported Jan. 31 that tap water in thousands of district houses recently tested above the federal limit for lead contamination.

Two-thirds of the 6,118 residences that D.C. Water and Sewer Authority tested last summer, or 4,075 homes, had water that exceeded the lead limit of 15 parts per billion set by the EPA in 1991. It was the first time the city's water has shown significant lead contamination since the late 1980s, officials said.

Officials said they are not sure what has caused the spike in lead levels. They are investigating whether changes in the way water is treated at the Washington Aqueduct could have a corrosive effect on lead pipes, the newspaper reported.

Groundwater problems also plagued some California cities. Frank Sweeney of the *San Jose Mercury News* reported that Congress approved \$1.75 million in federal grants to the Santa Clara Valley Water District to help clean up chemical contam-

ination in 450 drinking water wells from Morgan Hill to Gilroy.

Officials had not yet decided how to spend the grant money. But, it won't be for actual groundwater cleanup. Olin Corp., the company whose highway safety flare manufacturing plant in Morgan Hill caused perchlorate to contaminate the groundwater, is responsible for remediation.

The contamination was discovered a year ago at a 13-acre site in Morgan Hill where Olin manufactured flares from 1955 to 1996. Extensive testing of wells found that over the years, the chemical spread southeast 9.5 miles in the underground aquifers through semi-rural San Martin to the northern part of Gilroy.

Perchlorate is an oxidizer used in rocket fuel, highway flares, matches and fireworks. It disrupts iodine intake in the thyroid gland, which regulates hormone functions. Pregnant women and infants are most at risk, because perchlorate may impair neurological development in fetuses and small children.

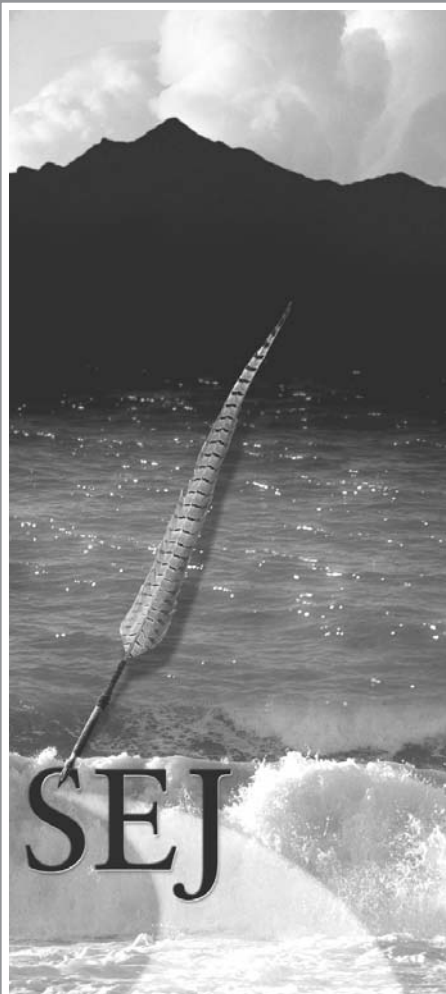
Cleaning up the groundwater could take decades and cost Olin tens of millions of dollars.

On Dec. 23, Dennis Lien of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency proposed adding another 211 lakes or river segments to its federally required list of polluted waters, pushing the total targeted for cleanup to almost 2,000.

The exercise, required every two years by the federal Clean Water Act, forces states to take steps to reduce pollution in listed water bodies. Targeted pollutants include fecal coliform bacteria, sediment, excess nutrients such as phosphorus, and mercury, a human neurotoxin, Lien wrote.

The state's impaired-waters list — those that fail to meet established water-quality standards — covers 1,916 stretches on 920 lakes and 203 streams. Many rivers, such as the Mississippi, have many impaired stretches, Lien said.

(Continued next page)



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In Florida, officials were headed in the other direction by trying to remove some waters once declared impaired, according to a Jan. 24 story by Mike Salinero of the *Tampa Tribune*.

For the better part of a century, a Buckeye pulp mill discharged millions of gallons of toxic waste each day into the Fenholloway River near Perry. It is the only river in the state ever designated an industrial ditch and is widely regarded as one of the most polluted in Florida.

Yet the state has dropped it from its list of impaired waters in need of special protection.

The Fenholloway, along with scores of other polluted state waterways once earmarked for cleanup under the Clean Water Act, might no longer be subject to higher water quality standards if state and federal regulators have their way, Salinero reported.

The EPA is considering fundamental changes in a federal rule that sets limits on how much pollution certain waterways can absorb and remain healthy.

Philadelphia Inquirer reporter Tom Avril wrote about the debate in his area over taking dams down for environmental reasons or leaving them in place for historical value.

"A free-flowing river is a healthy river. That's the theory behind a nationwide crusade that has removed 120 dams since 1999 in the name of fish habitat and water quality," Avril wrote. "But what happens when the dam is part of history?"

Straddling the Wissahickon Creek is one such relic from colonial Philadelphia — a low stone dam that once harnessed water power for Thomas Livezey's gristmill, said to have been the largest in the New World.

Tropical storms in 1999 and 2001 tore away the capstones from the dam's mid-section, leaving the structure vulnerable to future floods. Now Fairmount Park officials must make a choice:

Finish what nature began and remove the dam, or restore and preserve it in some way, recalling the days when southeastern Pennsylvania was king of wheat, exporting grain and flour throughout the world.

"There is that delightful quandary between what's best for the creek and what protects the historic resources," said Tom Pelikan, executive director of the nonprofit Friends of the Wissahickon, which has not taken a position on the issue.

Pennsylvania has removed 65 of its 4,000 dams since 1995, making it a national leader along with Wisconsin, according to American Rivers, a nonprofit organization that advocates removing dams. In New Jersey, few dams have been removed, though voters approved a \$200 million bond in November, of which about half will go to remove or repair dams, Avril reported.

Some environmental reporters found themselves drawn into reporting on the case of mad cow disease discovered in Washington state and the attention it brought to raising beef cattle.

Follow-up coverage focused primarily on the use of animal proteins in cattle feed.

On Feb. 6, Denise Grady of the *New York Times* reported that Americans have been learning more than they wanted to know about what cattle in this country have been eating.

"Though consumers may imagine bucolic scenes of nursing calves and cows munching on grass or hay, much of American agriculture no longer works that way. For years, calves have been fed cow's blood instead of milk, and cattle feed has been allowed to contain composted wastes from chicken coops, including feathers, spilled feed and even feces," Grady wrote.

Most people had never heard of those practices until the Food and Drug Administration barred them, saying they could spread mad cow disease.

Though the United States banned the use of cow parts in cattle feed in the 1990s, it still permits rendered matter from cows to be fed to pigs and chickens, and rendered pigs and chickens to be fed back to cows. Critics say that in theory, that sequence could bring mad cow disease full circle, back to cows, Grady said.

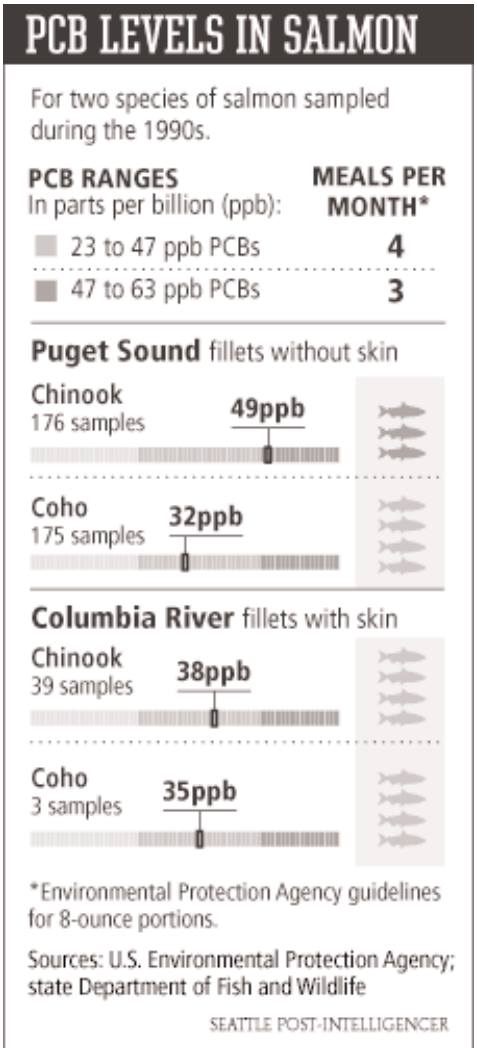
On Jan. 21, Chris McGann of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported that a Food and Drug Administration study found animal proteins in feed grain shipments from Canada.

Federal inspectors rejected at least 20 shipments of Canadian feed grain last year because spot tests revealed feathers, animal muscle fiber and hair inexplicably contaminating truckloads of canola, oats and other grain. The findings are particularly worrisome because neither U.S. Food and Drug Administration investigators nor the Canadian grain producers

know how the animal proteins entered the system. Mad cow disease is believed to spread through cattle feed supplemented by contaminated beef byproducts, McGann said.

After a Canadian steer tested positive for mad cow disease in May, the FDA began testing Canadian animal feed grains.

Well, one would think beef's bad news would hearten those who choose fish as a better dietary choice.



But, a study by the Environmental Working Group of Washington, D.C., a nonprofit public interest watchdog, reported last summer that farmed salmon were the most likely PCB-contaminated protein source in the national food supply, with a PCB content 16 times higher than that found in wild salmon and four times higher than the levels in beef. Industry groups criticized the findings, which were based on a sample of 10 store-bought fish in Washington, D.C., San Francisco, and

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The Beat... (from page 29)

Portland, Ore. A follow-up study in January reported a survey of 700 salmon found that the level of PCBs in fillets taken from farmed salmon were seven times as high as levels in fillets taken from wild salmon.

The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer's* Robert McClure and Lisa Stiffler report in mid-January Puget Sound's wild chinook salmon carry long-lived industrial chemicals at levels as high as those spotlighted by farm-raised salmon. In a few cases, the local fish were even more polluted.

But, state health officials, after studying Puget Sound salmon contamination levels for about a year, say they probably won't issue advice on how often the region's signature fish should be eaten. The reason: They believe the heart-healthy benefits of eating salmon outweigh the risks posed by PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, stored in the fish, they reported.

On Jan. 19, the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Avril reported that most salmon being eaten was raised in a "farm" — a giant cage floating in the ocean.

"Chances are, the fish was tainted with chemicals believed to cause cancer," Avril said. "Yet chances are, you will be perfectly fine. And because fish is good for the heart and brain, you might be better off eating more salmon rather than less — unless you end up as one of a very small fraction of the population to get cancer from it."

The authors of an article in the journal *Science* recommended that people eat no more than one eight-ounce serving a month of farmed salmon, which accounts for more than 90 percent of salmon sold in the United States, he wrote. Eating those amounts of tainted fish would cause an estimated one additional case of liver cancer for every 100,000 people — a theoretical number derived from studies on lab animals, Avril reported.

"Statistically speaking, that risk from the tainted fish is a relative drop in the bucket. Liver cancer is a common disease, afflicting 1 in 116 U.S. men and 1 in 238 women during their lifetimes. So if the typical woman ate twice as much salmon as recommended, her risk of liver cancer would be 1 in 238.00002," Avril wrote.

Peter Kennedy of the *Toronto Globe and Mail* reported that "like their colleagues in

the beef sector, players in Canada's \$700-million Atlantic salmon farming industry have been handed a sharp reminder that when it comes to the business of food, public perception is everything."

First, the beef industry weathered a mad-cow problem and then the U.S. study concluded that farm-raised Atlantic salmon are so laced with PCBs and other pollutants that they pose an increased risk of cancer and should be eaten only infrequently.

Air pollution problems continued to be another big story over the last quarter.

The *Houston Chronicle's* Dina Capiello reported a dozen plants belonging to major petroleum and petrochemical companies accounted for 80 percent of all pollution released accidentally into Houston's air last year.

The Feb. 8 story said Exxon Mobil's Baytown refinery topped the list in the amount of pollution released — spouting 1.6 million pounds during unexpected power failures, lightning strikes, equipment malfunctions and other so-called "upsets." BP's Texas City facility reported the highest number of events, at 104, in the region and state.

From Feb. 1 to Dec. 31, 2003, 121 facilities in the Houston region put 7.6 million pounds of pollution into the air during these accidental releases. While all the plants together averaged 8.8 upsets, the dozen plants in question averaged 41, she reported.

That's all excess pollution above and beyond the millions of pounds of chemicals the state allows plants to release into the air each year. And in most cases, the accidental releases go unpunished.

Recent evidence suggests that upsets play a large role in Houston's smog, and experts warn that without reducing these potent, short-lived bursts of contamination the region may not solve its air pollution problem, Capiello wrote.

The Bush administration's plans to curb mercury pollution from coal-burning plants was both praised by industry and criticized by environmental groups.

A federal expert panel sharply criticized the Bush administration's proposal to loosen upcoming rules on mercury pollution, according to a story by Alexander Lane in the Jan. 31 *Newark Star-Ledger*.

The EPA's Children's Health Protection

Advisory Committee expressed concern that the agency's approach "does not sufficiently protect our nation's children."

The administration's plan would scale back long-planned curbs on the emissions of mercury, a toxin that delays children's development and has proved alarmingly prevalent in the environment. Critics have charged the move was a giveaway to Bush's supporters in the coal industry, the nation's prime source of mercury emissions.

Stephen Frothingham of the *Associated Press* reported in late December that mercury was not only a concern for humans. Loons on Swain's Lake and Mendum's Pond in Barrington N.H., have produced eggs with the highest mercury levels of any tested in the country. A scientist who studies those eggs is citing them as evidence the Bush administration is headed down the wrong path with the mercury pollution plan it announced. David Evers, executive director of the BioDiversity Research Institute in Falmouth, Maine, says changes in mercury levels in the eggs suggest that mercury pollution stays close to its source, generally incinerators, coal-burning power plants and even home furnaces.

The solution, he says, is to require plants to use the best available technology to cut emissions.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch's* Sara Shipley reported Jan. 17 that air pollution from a Baldwin power plant, located about 50 miles away from the Gateway City, killed an estimated 5,700 people over 22 years, according to statistical models prepared for the federal government's lawsuit against the plant.

The previously undisclosed reports also estimate that Baldwin's emissions induced \$47 million worth of hospital stays and emergency room visits due to asthma attacks, cardiovascular disease and other illnesses, Shipley reported.

The plant is owned by Houston-based Dynegy Inc., which disputed the studies. Shipley reported that at one time, the plant emitted more toxic sulfur dioxide gas than any other coal-fired power plant in the country. Emissions have been reduced dramatically in the past five years at the plant, but not to the level that federal officials want.

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The deaths and health problems caused by this excess pollution could have been avoided, the government contends, had the coal-fired power plant installed the pollution filters required under the Clean Air Act. The Environmental Protection Agency sued Baldwin and dozens of other aging power plants in 1999, charging that they should have updated their pollution controls when they expanded or increased emissions, Shipley wrote.

"The reports paint a stark image of the damage caused by just one of the nation's 900 coal-burning power plants, which together provide more than half of the nation's electricity," Shipley wrote.

On Jan. 16, Judy Fahys of *The Salt Lake Tribune* wrote that Logan experienced its worst air quality in the seven years officials have been tracking the most dangerous type of microscopic soot.

Richard R. Long, director of air and radiation programs for the EPA's regional

office in Denver, described Logan's high PM (particulate matter) 2.5 pollution readings as worrisome, noting that the only higher readings came from severe wildfires in Montana.

"It's shocking Particulate matter is the one [pollutant] that kills people," he said, adding there is nothing to be done to ease the pollution until the weather changes, Fahys wrote. The Bear River Health Department and the state Air Quality Division warned the general public the air quality was "very unhealthy," a notch higher than the "unhealthful" advisories put into place for the more populated Utah, Davis and Salt Lake counties.

A month earlier, Fahys reported that breathing sooty air significantly increases a person's risk of dying from heart disease, according to a new study led by a Brigham Young University epidemiologist.

C. Arden Pope and his team found an 18 percent increase in death from heart

disease among people who had long-term exposure to increased levels of small-particle pollution and a 13 percent increase in death from altered heart rhythm, heart failure or cardiac arrest.

Their findings were published in *Circulation: The Journal of the American Heart Association*.

Also in January, Seth Borenstein of Knight Ridder Newspapers reported that the Bush administration issued a new federal rule that limits pollution testing. The new rule will likely make it harder for state and federal regulators to monitor pollution from some industrial smokestacks, he reported.

Fewer air polluters are likely to be caught if government agencies measure emissions from smokestacks less often, which critics say will happen under the new rule limiting a tool used by environmental cops, Borenstein wrote. Under the

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EMF risks... (from page 12)

opinions will induce members of the public to respond 'as members of those groups,' resulting in exaggerated perceptions of differences among groups." However, they noted that though this was particularly strong for union group members, it did not extend to other groups. They speculated that in some cases, as with members of church groups, this might be a case of no coverage — the news media did not present church affiliation "as relevant to the WTO problem."

For more information, see "Group Affiliations, Opinion Polarization, and Global Organizations: Views of the World Trade Organization Before and After Seattle," by Cathy F. Bullock, Michael McCluskey, Keith Stamm, Keiko Tanaka, Marcos Torees, and Cathie Scott, in *Mass Media & Society*, November 2002.

Researchers link demographics, employment biases to experts' risk assessment of EMFs

A recent study found that experts' assessment of the risks related to electromagnetic fields (EMFs) may be shaped by their education level and employment sector.

The survey was completed by 81 participants at a bioelectromagnetics conference and included questions designed to measure their assessments of EMF risks and to garner demographic data, including age, gender, education level, and employment sector (government, private, utility, university).

The survey contained questions about reports that presented conflicting conclusions about the impact of EMFs on human health — the 1996 National Academy of Science and 1997 National Cancer Institute reports, which concluded that EMFs pose no threat to human health at exposure levels typically found in homes, and the 1999 National Institute of Environmental

Health Sciences and U.S. Department of Energy report, which concluded that even extremely low frequency EMFs cannot be considered safe because some evidence links them to leukemia.

The researchers found that the higher the education level, the more likely these respondents agreed with the reports suggesting that EMFs do not threaten human health, and that people who worked at utility companies tended to agree with these reports more than employees in other sectors. And the study showed that women tended to show greater concern about the risk of EMFs than men, although these findings were not statistically significant.

The researchers suggested that even though the study included only a small number of respondents, it points to the need to explore this line of inquiry in the future.

"Certainly, job affiliation effects may have important implications for risk communication given that if one works in a particular industry, as discerned in this study, one's views may be different or biased," they wrote. "This bias may be conveyed to the public, which often is unaware of the characteristics of the presenter and the history of the risk issues."

For more information, see "Attitudes About Electric and Magnetic Fields: Do Scientists and Other Risk Experts Perceive Risk Similarly?" by Shari McMahan, Rafer Lutz and Jon'a Meyer in *Journal of Environmental Health*, December 2002.

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The Beat... (from page 31)

new rule, the EPA will limit how often federal and state environmental police can monitor some stacks.

Just about as commonplace today as toilets are cell phones.

New Scientist reported in its January issue that “the first in a series of eagerly anticipated nationwide studies has concluded that the use of mobile phones poses no increased risk of brain cancer — at least not for the first 10 years.”

A Danish study on cell phone impacts is likely to carry more weight with health authorities and scientists than many previous studies because of its large sample size and careful design. Earlier studies that claimed to find evidence of a health risk have been criticized for weaknesses, *New Scientist* reported.

The new work is the first to be published from the huge INTERPHONE study, organized by the International

Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). It involves 13 different countries and aims to answer definitively the question of whether mobile phone use is safe.

In the short term, the study indicates there is no danger of developing tumors, says principal investigator Helle Christensen at the Institute of Cancer Epidemiology in Copenhagen. Michael Clark of the UK’s National Radiological Protection Board is impressed by the work: “This is an authoritative study.”

Another interesting story that can be done by reporters just about anywhere came from Haya El Nasser of *USA Today* in a Jan. 19 story about the interesting way former gas stations are now being used.

There are an estimated 200,000 abandoned gas stations across the United States, El Nasser wrote. Despite their prime locations, developers have largely ignored them. Many builders don’t want to

be responsible for costly environmental cleanups of often-contaminated sites, known as “brownfields,” before they can be redeveloped.

But the old filling stations are becoming more appealing to developers and business owners. Federal and state governments are freeing up money to clean and redevelop them. Now, banks in Hackensack, N.J., stores and parks in Indianapolis and apartments in Oakland occupy land where boarded-up stations once stood.

Some states and cities see the trend to find new uses for old stations as a key in revitalizing neighborhoods and slowing sprawl, *USA Today* reported.

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