

Former EPA director advocates balancing environment, business

Christine Todd Whitman served a frustration-filled two years as administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. She joined the Bush administration as it began its first term, and she was regarded highly as a moderate voice. But two years later, a period interrupted by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, she resigned, frustrated by environmental groups, business resistance, congressional opposition and a White House that appeared to have its eye on different victories.

Whitman will be in town next week to address Valley Forward's Livability Summit, which will focus on smarter growth strategies, said Diane Brossart, the group's executive director. Valley Forward is an organization that promotes a balance of economic growth and environmental quality.

The Republic's Michael Clancy discussed the issues with Whitman, a former governor of New Jersey.

Q. How did being administrator of the EPA change your perspective on environmental issues?

A. Being head of the agency heightened my awareness, especially the challenge of individual behavior. If you look at water quality, for example, there is as much oil released in eight months from non-point sources (sources with a single point of origin) such as private individuals as there was in the Exxon Valdez spill, which is still this country's worst environmental disaster. I focused much more on the scope and the breadth of the challenge.

Q. What is working well for the American environment?

A. There is more emphasis by the average person on environmental concerns. There is pressure on corporations to list what they are doing, shareholders who are concerned about the environment. Lots of businesses are stepping up on their own to do things such as improve greenhouse emissions. A lot is starting to happen now, voluntarily. We are better off environmentally than when the EPA began (in 1970), but we still have a long way to go.

Q. Such as? What is not working?

A. Our water is less polluted, and we have no rivers spontaneously combusting, but still, 40 percent of the nation's drinking water does not meet standards. We have improved air quality and reduced emissions, but we still have an epidemic of asthma. Things like that tell you we have a lot to do.

Q. What are the key challenges to creating sound environmental policy?

A. Everything we do requires people to spend money or change behaviors for results they never see. We can go after a ranch about a problem with animal waste, for example, and the rancher might say this does not add an ounce to my steer. Hard to convince people of these kinds of things. To this day, when you ask American people to list their key issues, they don't list the environment. People assume they will always have clean air, clean water.



Christine Todd Whitman

If you go

Valley Forward's Livability Summit

What: A half-day forum on growing smarter.

When: 7:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. April 21.

Where: Phoenix Convention Center, 111 N. Third St.

Admission: \$130, includes breakfast and lunch.

Information: (602) 240-2408.

Q. Can the government always be trusted to do the job?

A. The problem is that every time you make a decision, you set a threshold, so the real challenge here is what is acceptable. We will have policies on water, policies on the air, and we have to find the balance that allows for economic growth, affordable power and water, and yet protects health. In the years since the EPA was founded, you had the Clean Water and Clean Air acts, and the economy was growing. Clearly, we have shown that environmental regulation does not stifle economic growth.

Q. What were some of the major barriers to good environmental policy in the Bush administration?

A. They had more important priorities after 9/11, and they faced political pressures from people who support them who have no interest in this matter. You also have (Capitol) Hill, where the chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee (Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla.) has called for the dismantling of the EPA. He is not very comfortable with regulation and believes we don't need it. What fascinated me is that Republicans who were opposed to regulation were not interested in voluntary programs, either.

There also are environmental groups who seek total purity; no compromise is good enough for them.

However, when we look back, we can see that some efforts done without regulations were done faster and at half the cost, sometimes even exceeding what we wanted. Sulfur dioxide emissions, for example. Capitalism works if you put some incentives in there and government backs off a little.

At the end of the day, after all, we are talking about the gross amount going into the air.