


MARTY MEEHAN AND PAUL EPSTEIN



Making noise on global warming

By Marty Meehan and Paul Epstein | December 21, 2006

THE REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. warned that "our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." There are few matters of international importance that could have more dire consequences than being silent about the dangers of global warming.

Rising sea levels, shrinking glaciers, an increase in severe weather, from hurricanes to heat waves -- the effects of global warming are evident all around us. Perhaps even more insidious are the negative health effects of global warming.

Carbon dioxide boosts ragweed pollen that contributes to asthma and the growth and toxicity of poison ivy. Meanwhile, warming is encouraging the spread of mosquito- and tick-borne ills, like West Nile and Lyme disease. From the high asthma rates in Massachusetts to malaria scaling Mount Kenya, sick children have become the first victims of rising temperatures and extreme weather.

Despite these troubling signs, government scientists and experts on climate change have been stopped by President Bush and administration officials from reporting their scientific findings on the link between global warming and human activity. Last spring, a bipartisan group of nearly 50 members of Congress called on the administration to stop silencing government scientists, most notably James Hansen. Hansen -- head of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, and one of the world's most renowned climatologists -- was prohibited from speaking to the press about the dangers of climate change, and had his remarks and reports heavily edited by political appointees who did not agree with his conclusions.

In addition, the Environmental Protection Agency recently disclosed that it is considering doing away with health standards for lead air pollution, which could unravel over 25 years of clean-air progress. This is part of a new approach to policy-making at the EPA that will effectively muzzle independent, outside science advisers by diminishing their role while inflating the influence of political appointees at the agency.

Without question, in order to bring about meaningful solutions to the global warming crisis, Congress and the public must have access to unbiased scientific research. Massachusetts has been a pioneer in this arena, and will benefit greatly when this science is allowed to continue free of political influence. Regional universities -- such as the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, MIT, Tufts, and Harvard -- all have internationally renowned researchers in climate, energy, and renewable energy, while UMass-Lowell also boasts the nation's first doctorate program in green chemistry.

This strong scientific community makes Massachusetts uniquely poised to lead a national discussion about global warming and develop solutions to this international crisis. One such solution, the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) -- extending from Maine to Maryland (save Rhode Island) and soon to include Massachusetts -- can combine forces with California and eastern Canadian provinces to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, even in the absence of national regulations and standards.

Indeed, within "clean tech" markets, the Commonwealth's economy stands to benefit from developing products that are both good for the environment and the economy. With world-class universities and a high-tech sector, the Bay State has the opportunity to capture a high share of emissions reduction investment dollars, and generate many new high-paying jobs.

According to a study by the Mass Technology Collaborative, the state already has gained some 10,000 jobs in markets involving energy-efficient and renewable-energy technologies.

Instead of silencing government climate experts, the federal government should take a cue from states like Massachusetts and become an active leader and partner in efforts to combat global warming. The president, working

with Congress, should raise automotive fuel efficiency standards and increase support for public transportation; promote "green buildings" or green homes, schools and businesses; institute a RGGI-style federal program to cap greenhouse gas emissions and encourage trade and cooperation; eliminate "perverse" subsidies for fossil fuels; and institute significant financial incentives for producers and consumers to adopt energy-efficient and green technologies.

Hansen's silence and that of the EPA scientists was forced against their will by the Bush administration. Still, a passive silence is just as dangerous as one actively imposed. If we are truly to heed King's observation, then all of us, not just the experts, must refuse to remain silent about the need to address global warming. And Massachusetts' voice should be among the loudest seeking solutions.

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