

Confronting Chemophobia

Keynote Address by
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Thank you, David.

I want to congratulate you and your Pittsburgh Chemical Day committee for an outstanding job! This has been a great day for the chemical industry. And you folks deserve a round of applause.

I'll bet the Greater Pittsburgh Convention and Visitors Bureau loves this conference as much as we do. This event gets bigger and better every year.

The size of this audience reminds me of the time when I was giving a speech and the microphone went dead. I didn't think the folks in the back could hear me, so I called to the back of the room, "Can you hear me back there?" And a faint answer came back, "No." Before I could get the next word out, a fellow in the front row jumped up and shouted to the back, "Do you want to trade places!?"

I guess what I was saying must have scared him! But that fellow was really no different from a lot of folks today who seem to thrive on fear.

Look what makes the best-seller lists. Stephen King with *The Stand* and Michael Crichton with *Jurassic Park*, which is also being made into a movie.

And how about the movies? Fright films like *Aliens*, *Fire in the Sky*, and *Cape Fear* cash in on our phobias.

My topic tonight is about another kind of phobia — chemophobia. That's a word coined to

describe an irrational fear of chemicals. Chemophobia isn't new to Hollywood. Movies like *Toxic Avenger*, *Backdraft*, and even *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* have the fear of chemicals as an underlying theme. Chemophobia is big business. Big enough to become a major threat to our industry.

Now, I'm not here to take on Hollywood. Or the publishing industry. But I am here to discuss three aspects of chemophobia — first, why the general public is developing a fear of chemicals; second, what can happen if such a fear is not confronted; and third, how we can overcome it.

Dixie Lee Ray, a scientist and former Governor of the state of Washington, says in her book *Trashing the Planet*, that “despite all the evidence of our physical well-being beyond the dreams of all previous generations, we seem to have become a nation of easily frightened people — the healthiest hypochondriacs in the world!”

Unfortunately, she's right.

And alarmists in the environmental community have learned that it pays to frighten the public.

In the twenty-three years since the first Earth Day in 1970, environmental groups have grown into a national network by effectively marketing one environmental crisis after another. Today, an estimated support base of four million people channel funds to a small army of well-paid administrators, lobbyists, lawyers, and accountants.

The need to pay an estimated \$650 million annually for salaries, legal fees, and communications campaigns has driven many environmental groups to rely on “scare tactics, conspiracy theories, bogeymen, and preposterous levels of exaggeration,” according to Gregg Easterbrook, a respected environmental journalist.

The constant need for cash through contributions has caused the leaders of some environmental groups to become “crisis entrepreneurs” — experts at identifying and marketing environmental problems. These clever marketeers have teamed with scientists in search of research funds and journalists turned advocates to form what has been described as a “crisis industry.”

Ron Bailey, in his book *Eco-Scam*, describes how the “crisis industry” works.

Consider “global warming” — the major topic at the Earth Summit in Rio last year. The crisis goes like this: Chemical emissions released during industrial activity is heating the earth's surface at a very rapid rate. And because of high levels of carbon dioxide created by burning oil, natural gas, and coal, we are leaving the next generation with an increased possibility of famines, floods, and pestilence of Biblical proportion.

As wild as the scenario is, a large segment of the public bought it! Lock, stock and barrel. A recent poll found that 74 percent of Americans think the greenhouse effect is a serious problem. Forty-one percent believe it is a *very* serious problem.

But is “global warming” all that it has been hyped up to be?

“No,” say many of the nation’s most respected scientists. Recent evidence presented by climatologists indicate that the earth might be at the end of a century-long cooling period, which gives every reason to suggest that the earth is warming naturally.

But environmental alarmists don’t buy such scientific evidence. They say the only way to save the planet is to reduce industrial activity. Reduce chemical emissions. Now! Before it’s too late! And there is a rush to regulate before good science and sound reasoning have a chance to prove them wrong.

What are the results of the “global warming” crisis so far? Increased contributions to environmental groups. Increased funding for government sponsored scientific studies. An increase in the number of environmental stories in the media. And it’s responsible for the proposed BTU tax. Make no mistake. The BTU tax *is* an environmental *tax*.

The bottom line is that the fear of chemicals is a big money maker — a revenue generator — in the crisis industry.

Now, for my second point — what can happen if the fear of chemicals is not confronted? The same thing that happened to the U.S. nuclear power industry.

In the early stages of its development, nuclear technology promised to supply the homes, the shops, and the factories of America with safe, inexpensive electricity.

In 1980, 82 permits were granted for the construction of nuclear reactors in America. In 1990, only nine.

What happened?

Flawed technology? Unsafe practices?

The answer is “No!”

The decline of the nuclear industry began with the diligent and concerted efforts of environmental alarmists who achieved their objective through well-placed, well-funded communications campaigns that preyed on the fears and emotions of the American public.

The result?

Regulations that are now so strict that the cost of constructing a nuclear power plant today almost doubles the price of a kilowatt of electricity. That makes an investment in nuclear energy uneconomical.

Crisis entrepreneurs are now hard at work in the forests of the Pacific Northwest, where they are practicing their craft with a religious fervor.

Under the auspices of protecting an endangered species, more than 15,000 logging and lumber mill jobs have been lost since 1990. Tens of thousands more job losses are expected.

In an editorial on the Timber Summit, the *Wall Street Journal* said, “On a host of Western resource questions, common ground is scarce...because one party in the dispute thinks the Earth is sanctified.” The article went on to

say, "It's clear that much of the environmentalist energy is derived from what has been called the Religious Left, a secular, even pagan, fanaticism that now worships such gods as nature and gender with a reverence formerly accorded real religions."

In the religion of contemporary environmentalism, the chemical industry is easy to demonize. Let's look at what could happen to the chemical industry if a BTU tax — the equivalent of an energy sin tax — is forced upon American industry as an antidote to global warming.

Economists at the Chemical Manufacturers Association calculate that, even with a feedstock exemption, the currently proposed BTU tax will lead to a direct loss of nearly 10,000 high-paying chemical industry jobs, which will have a rippling effect throughout the nation. A BTU tax will, in effect, subsidize foreign goods coming in, penalize goods made in America, and will add to an already large U.S. trade deficit. The chemical industry consistently adds to the plus side of the Balance of Trade — over \$16 billion in 1992 — a fact that should not be ignored by

Every job created under the Clinton Administration's proposed new "jobs program" will cost American taxpayers an estimated \$55,000 each, according to Pete Dominici, a senator from New Mexico. If that kind of investment were made *saving* high-tech jobs in industries like ours, then this nation would have little need to jump-start its economy.

But saving high-tech jobs is not in the best interest of some environmental groups. Their view is that the chemical industry, and the technology it represents, is not "appropriate" technology. Their view is that the chemical industry will *never* be compatible with the environment.

But they are wrong.

The World Bank's *1992 World Development Report* made it clear that "without development, environmental protection will fail." Study after study shows that wealthier nations are healthier nations — both in terms of quality of life and the environment. Only when people have satisfied their basic human needs can they turn their

It's through chemicals that we now live better and longer lives than in any other time in history.

If we do not confront chemophobia, the advancement of chemical technology that continually increases our standard of living will be lost, along with the hopes of a higher quality of life for billions of people around the world.

Now, for my third point — can the fear of chemicals be overcome?

I say Yes. The cure for chemophobia is credibility — credibility in the chemical industry. Credibility in the scientific community. And credibility in the news media.

Not far from here, in East Liverpool, Ohio, all three put their credibility on the line over the commercial start-up of a hazardous-waste incinerator. Grandstanding by environmental alarmists successfully kept the fear of chemicals in the media. Meanwhile, new technology and approximately one hundred well-paying jobs were held hostage until the courts heard their appeals. Due process is now over, and, as the *Wall Street Journal* put it, "After 13 years, the state-of-the-art plant can finally go about its legitimate business."

I want to applaud Von Roll, the company that designed and built the incinerator. They took a stand to defend advanced incineration technology. Through their efforts, good science and high technology now have an opportunity to demonstrate that hazardous wastes can be disposed of in a safe, environmentally compatible, and efficient manner.

Their efforts also kept the door open for a renewed interest in waste-to-energy incineration. With the proposed taxes on fossil fuels, empty milk jugs, detergent bottles, and soda bottles could become a viable and, quite possibly, a non-taxable fuel source.

The Scandinavians call plastics "white coal." And for good reason. A pound of high-density polyethylene generates approximately 19,000 BTUs, twice the energy as a pound of coal. Two pounds of P.E.T. soda bottles generate approximately 22,000 BTUs, the equivalent of one pound of fuel oil.

Technological advances that bring solutions to our environmental problems will help restore credibility in the chemical industry. The general public expects more from the chemical industry than perhaps any other sector of world commerce.

The chemical industry is, without question, one of the most global of all world industries. And because we are integral to so many other basic industries, world society expects us to produce high quality products, and do it safely, efficiently, and with negligible impact on the environment.

However, we are not living up to their expectations. We have managed, by complacency and negligence, to collectively gather so much adverse publicity that the public's patience with us is wearing thin.

But I am glad to say that through the efforts of Responsible Care, the chemical industry is making great strides to tighten up its operations

and to regain the public's confidence. Our outreach programs, our Community Advisory Panels, and our efforts to be more responsive to the concerns of our plant-site communities have enhanced our industry's credibility.

But as diligent as we have been in implementing an industry-wide code of conduct, the public continues to demand more from us.

The fact remains that no matter how much we do, no matter how loudly we profess our concern for the environment, no matter how much we invest to reduce pollution, the public is not going to trust our word alone.

If the chemical industry is to regain the public's confidence, we must embrace the concept of third-party verification.

Third-party verification figured prominently in discussions at the Earth Summit in Rio, and it continues to be a leading demand by environmental groups. Third-party audits by competent professionals are now an accepted practice in meeting international quality standards. And because of the success of the auditing process in the quality arena, the International Standards Organization is now considering the feasibility of environmental auditing. The European Community will initiate some form of eco-auditing later this year.

So, under the circumstances, the only reasonable thing for the U.S. chemical industry to do is to formulate a position so that we will be able to take part in policy discussions on the issue.

At this point, the best way for us to regain the public's trust is through a trusted third party.

Now, can the same be said for science? Perhaps so, according to the *New York Times*. The credibility of scientific testimony has become so questionable that the U.S. Supreme Court — acting as a third-party — will decide this summer what sort of evidence can be heard by a jury and what sort of credentials scientists and other experts must possess in order to take the witness stand.

Publishing speculation in the name of good science and orchestrating press conferences in pursuit of public funding has politicized science to the point that, according to the *Times*, “juries are so often bedazzled by so-called experts that they cannot discriminate between sound and crack-pot science.”

If juries can be viewed as a true subset of the American public, then it's safe to say that the public-at-large is having difficulty distinguishing between sound science and junk science.

In a recent speech in Boston, Sherwood Rowland, president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, said that “if scientists expect to retain public support for their efforts, they must do a much better job of explaining what they do.” Professor Rowland believes that scientists have failed badly at helping others understand science.

I agree. Scientists who traffic in fear jeopardize the public's confidence in *all* science.

Honest and open communications between the public and the scientific community will go a long way in repairing the public's confidence in real science.

Now, what about credibility in the news media?

There is an old saying in journalism that goes like this: "Even if your mother says she loves you — check it out."

When it comes to chemicals and the environment, the media seems to ignore that rule. As *Wall Street Journal* columnist George Melloan pointed out, "reporters and editors seem to suspend their normal skepticism when the magic word "environment" is invoked."

Chemical scare stories like Alar, Love Canal, and Agent Orange were sold to the public on high drama and emotion at the expense of professional credibility. Recent scientific evidence has shown the media guilty of prematurely rushing their environmental stories to press without the benefit of all the facts.

What's the motivation behind this lapse in judgment?

Michael Fumento, in his book, *Science Under Siege*, points to a variety of factors at play in the media's distortion of the news. Among them are sensationalism, the need for visual impact, the crunch of deadlines, and yes, a tendency to adopt a cause.

At a 1989 conference on the global environment sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution, Charles Alexander said, "As the science editor of

Time, I would freely admit that on this issue we have crossed the boundary from news reporting to advocacy."

When professional journalists cross the line that separates professional reporting and a personal feeling for a cause, credibility is the big loser. Once reporters step over the line, they are no longer professional journalists, but professional advocates. From that point on, objectivity is just a matter of personal preference.

How industry, science, and journalism work together to provide the public with reliable and accurate information will be, to a large degree, the measure of America's success in solving some of its most pressing environmental problems.

As former EPA chief William Reilly said recently, "People have a right to expect that public officials are making the right choices for the right reasons. We need to develop a new system for taking action on the environment that isn't based on responding to the nightly news."

It's time to stop scaring the public. It's time to focus on environmental issues that can provide real benefits to society. Signs of significant change are showing up in two areas. First at EPA, with Carol Browner's business-like attitude toward the Delaney clause. And second, in the press. The recent five-part series on the environment in the *New York Times* is a refreshing and well-balanced look at America's environmental policy.

I want to applaud Keith Schneider, Joel Brinkley, and Michael Specter for their work in putting that series together.

Information that is incorrect and inflammatory must be challenged when there is a need to challenge. But more importantly, we must establish a dialogue among honest professionals in science, journalism, and industry who are willing to share information openly and fairly. Communications among these professionals must make a paradigm shift if the public good is to be served.

Without such a shift — without such a dialogue — the fear, the suspicion, and the prejudice that has given rise to chemophobia will continue to dominate the public's attitude toward the chemical industry and toward technology in general.

It's our charge — all of us here tonight who understand chemicals, who work with chemicals everyday, and who are developing new chemical technologies — it's our charge to tell our story. The public has the need to know of the benefits of our industry. They need to know that there is much to respect in the chemical industry, but little to fear.

The news media is our best hope of educating the public. But it's our responsibility to educate the media. We're not asking the media to trust us. We're asking the media to track our safety records, track our worker health records, and track our environmental performance records. Let the facts speak for themselves.

And if we fall below public expectations, the American people have every right to call for better performance from our industry. By the same token, the public has a right to hear of our improved environmental performance, and to

hear of our health-care progress, and to hear of our gains in transportation and plant safety.

Creating an atmosphere of trust might appear to be an idealistic task. Maybe so. But it's better to attempt and fail than not to attempt at all. And there is no better place to begin our task than right here at the Pittsburgh Chemical Day. This conference has been held every year for the past twenty-six years to celebrate the progress of our industry. And I think it is appropriate to add the elimination of chemophobia to the celebration of that progress.

If we work hard together in creating an open dialogue with the public, with the scientific community, and with the popular media, we can celebrate here in Pittsburgh when the fear of chemicals is reduced to nothing more than a story line for Hollywood's next fright film.