

Letters from Here and There

Congressman Nick Begich
Alaska
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

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Mr. Lew Williams, Editor
Ketchikan Daily News
Ketchikan, Alaska 99901

Dear Mr. Williams:

In the debate that has followed House passage of the Water Pollution Control Act, certain misconceptions have been created which merit comment. Because this legislation is so important and so complex, I hope I can add some additional perspectives for consideration.

The most disturbing aspects of the debate are the claims that the House version of this bill is anti-environment, and that it is immeasurably weaker than the Senate version passed earlier. Although all statements of this nature are suspect by virtue of their generality, I believe there are some important specific considerations as well.

To say that either the House or Senate bill is anti-environment or pro-industry is no less than nonsense. Both bills represent the strongest, most comprehensive water pollution measures ever to emerge from each of the respective Houses of Congress. From the beginning, the goal of each chamber was to create landmark legislation in response to a clearly recognized national water quality crisis.

The Senate bill was completed first, and the House Public Works Committee had the benefit of examining the Senate bill while preparing its own. In doing so, the House chose to follow concepts which were different than those of the Senate. I would like to explain some of these differences, as they are often the basis for the "stronger and weaker" comparisons of the bills.

One difference most often mentioned is that the Senate bill sets absolute deadlines of 1981 for having all water suitable for human use and 1985 for complete control of all pollution. There was strong pressure, especially in a political year, for the House to make the same absolute promise as the Senate. I can only say that after having attended nearly 100% of the hearings, and having heard scores of witnesses with diverse credentials, I believe such an absolute promise to be incapable of fulfillment. The House established the same dates and goals, and funded a massive research project by the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering to find whether or not these goals can be met and possibly advanced. The Senate bill provides for no such study. My belief is that, at a time when a total and conscientious solution is mandatory, promises must not be made without having the knowledge that they can be kept.

A second major conceptual difference is the role assigned to the individual states in water pollution control. The Senate bill assigned nearly total power to the Federal government for pollution control which, like the civil rights crisis of the fifties and sixties, is viewed as yielding only to Federal pressure. The House bill establishes minimum Federal guidelines, but places much greater responsibility on the states, on the theory that they can most sensitively address

their own pollution problems, perhaps at a level far above the guidelines. The House bill also provides more Federal financial assistance to states than does the Senate bill, and divides the money between states based on need rather than population. The House bill also establishes a \$100 million financing authority to help local communities to finance their pollution control programs.

These major conceptual dif-

ferences — the emphasis on and assistance for state and local efforts and the desire to make comprehensive findings in advance of making absolute promises — are the major areas of debate. I believe that the House concepts are preferable, quite frankly, but I do not say that they represent methods which are more or less environmentally sensitive than those of the Senate bill. Each bill represents

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well-considered and valid, though different, approaches to solving the crisis.

Beyond these major differences, the House bill has a number of superior features to the Senate bill, including \$24.6 billion total spending on pollution control as opposed to only \$20 billion in the Senate bill. The House bill provides \$18.35 billion in Federal grants for municipal waste treatment plants, and the Senate bill provides only \$14 billion. The House bill also creates and funds the financing authority for local communities and provides for substantially more longrange research than does the Senate bill.

In addition to these differences, there are many provisions of both bills which are shared. All of this may seem to say that in no regard is the Senate bill better. I do not say this, as I believe both of these bills have substantial merit as approaches to the problem. Also, I must honestly say that the House bill is not the exact bill I would have written, should I have done it alone. I differ with aspects of the bill and battled vigorously in committee to make changes. Like all major legislation, it is no one's bill, but rather represents the thinking of a number of Congressman.

All of this brings me to a final point, which is an extremely practical one in the realities of legislation. This bill was subject to incredibly strong pressures from all sides as it was early recognized as a landmark effort.

My strong belief is that the bill which emerged from the House Public Works Committee was the best compromise between those who wanted a strong bill and those who wanted no bill at all. Once this bill moved to the floor, the question was whether or not the members of the committee would split to vote on amendments, or remain generally unified. Although no formal unity existed, the Committee, including myself, tended to vote to support the bill as reported by the Committee.

The reason is very simple, and it was shared by a great many members. It was the clear realization that a non-unified Committee would surely result in the weakening of the bill.

In summary, let me just say that a portrayal of this vote as industry versus environment is totally inaccurate. A more accurate appraisal would be that it was a struggle to maintain a good bill, the best water pollution bill ever passed in the House, against a wide range of efforts to open it up for a complete amending process, which would have had disastrous effects on the content of the bill.

At this time, the two versions of the bill must be reconciled in Conference Committee, and it is my hope that the results will include the merits of both versions. My priority remains unchanged. I believe we must achieve clean water as fast as possible, and we must be prepared to pay the costs.

Sincerely,

NICK BEGICH