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IN BRIEF

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TWELFTH ANNUAL AMEUS CONFERENCE On the Eve of the Year 2000: The Future of Environmental Studies

INTRODUCTION

The twelfth annual conference of the Association de la maîtrise en environnement de l'Université de Sherbrooke (AMEUS) was held on 12 March 1999 in Sherbrooke, Quebec. In the course of a day devoted to the theme of the environment, the invited speakers shared with participants their vision of global issues in the next millennium. Fourteen experts from industry, government and the para-public sector put forward their ideas on the future environmental stakes for humanity, and the methods we must adopt for dealing with them. The globalization of the issues, and the need for profound change in how we manage the environment guided the speakers' comments.

REPORTS

Globalization of Environmental Issues

(Jean-Pierre Gauthier, Environment Canada)

To illustrate the saying "think globally, act locally," the speaker summarized events in environmental matters since the early 1960s. According to him, while 30 years ago people's awareness of pollution was expressed in local responses, recent years have seen more concerted action toward globalization of environmental issues.

The presentation closed with a personal vision of the future and the environmental challenges it offers. According to Mr. Gauthier, each relatively local negative repercussion will have an enormous impact on society around the world. In his view, demographic growth and access to drinking water, which are sources of possible future conflict and global destabilization, will be the main problems to overcome. He believes that the preservation of endangered species and their importance to humanity are just as serious as such issues as biotechnologies

and the need to develop them in an intelligent and ethical context, persistent organic pollutants, climatic change and the unequal distribution of resources between countries in the North and South. According to Mr. Gauthier, the concept of "thinking globally, acting locally" perfectly sums up all sustainable development strategies and illustrates one aspect of the approach that must be taken in future.

Agricultural Activity, Agricultural Development and the Environment - The 2005 Horizon

(Jocelyn Cantin, Ministère de l'agriculture, des pêcheries et de l'alimentation du Québec)

The speaker first presented a complete overview of the Quebec agricultural industry from 1999 to 2005 (jobs, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), exports, regional presence, social context and economic growth). He then briefly described the environmental problems associated with the industry's activities, such as pressure on land and water ecosystems, the impact of chemicals on health, and related social issues. In the third part of the presentation, Mr. Cantin talked about what is now being done by the Department and by farmers to reduce the impact of agricultural activities on the environment. He pointed out that, as a result of the implementation of *agro-environmental practices*, 90% of agricultural enterprises in Quebec will by 2005 have adopted farming methods that respect nature; he also noted that an *agro-environmental overview* (a status report) of each of these 20,000 farms has already been started. This step would be followed by the implementation of practices such as manure storage and management, fertilizer management, soil and waterway conservation and pesticide use. In conclusion, the speaker said that the program would lead to *environmental certification* of agricultural enterprises, whereby producers will be accredited according to

detailed procedures and criteria to be developed by 2003.

Dinner Speech: Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development

(Brian Emmet, Office of the Auditor General of Canada)

Mr. Emmet began his speech by outlining the major international environmental issues. According to him, the dawn of the 21st century will be characterized by the growth in world population and the resulting increase in global energy consumption, gross national product (GNP) and pressure on the environment. To illustrate the ineffectiveness of the present *vertical* organizational structure of governments, the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development cited Canada's inability to achieve the objectives set for it at the Rio Summit. Those objectives, which provided that the Government of Canada was to reduce its greenhouse gas production for the year 2000 to 1990 levels, are, like those of the other signatory countries, still not achieved. Some writers predict that greenhouse gases will even have increased by 70% world-wide in 2000. The speaker noted that governments already have a number of tools for intervention, such as the Basel Convention, the Biodiversity Convention and the Kyoto Protocol. In Mr. Emmet's view, the problem therefore stems not from lack of agreements, since numerous accords have been signed to date, but rather from failure to implement them.

Mr. Emmet said that, in order to meet global challenges, leaders will have to organize their various governments horizontally, rather than vertically. In addition, they will have to manage environmental programs more effectively and pay more attention to their implementation.

Beyond the Limits: Major Trends on the Eve of the 21st Century

(Harvey Mead, Union québécoise pour la conservation de la nature)

The speaker reviewed the broad trends identified in 1972 by the Club of Rome report *Limits to Growth*. At that time, the results of a hundred equations formed the rationale for the environmental movement which is still valid today: if there is no change in the behaviour of the world's population, it is highly likely that society's support systems will deteriorate.

Mr. Mead said that an updated analysis carried out by the same team 20 years later had reached the same conclusions as in 1972. According to these, the year 2025 is still seen as the beginning of deterioration in the support systems of humanity and the biosphere resulting from the excesses of the previous decades. The speaker cited the disaster caused by Hurricane Mitch in Honduras to illustrate these assertions. In his analysis of how payment of the environmental debt of recent decades could be spread over the 21st century, he suggested that the decline has already begun. He concluded that, in view of this obvious social and political problem, we must apply the principle of prudence in our future development actions and strategies.

Kyoto and the Transportation Sector

(Yvon Beauregard, Bombardier Inc.)

The speaker addressed the impact of the Kyoto Protocol on the transportation industry's management of the environment. After briefly outlining the events leading up to the Protocol in 1997, Mr. Beauregard examined the contribution of the transportation sector to the reduction in greenhouse gases. He listed the projects implemented by the Bombardier company to reduce greenhouse gases to 1990 levels by 2008; included were exemptions, clean development measures, emission credits and joint implementation programs.

According to the speaker, the ratification and implementation of the Kyoto Protocol will require an overhaul of energy policy and a change in the practices and behaviour of the world's population. The transportation sector will have to play a direct part in selecting and designing both the products marketed and their impact on greenhouse gas emissions. In Mr. Beauregard's view, these challenges will demand an enormous effort but will lead not only to sustainable development, but also to valuable business opportunities that will have to be incorporated into society's normal development process.

On the Eve of the Year 2000, Is There Still a Place for Environmental Litigation?

(Pierre Châtillon)

In his presentation, the speaker briefly analyzed the changes in the courts in recent years and noted that increasing numbers of individuals and environmental groups are initiating legal proceedings in Quebec involving environmental interests. Referring to a

series of cases currently before the Quebec courts, Mr. Châtillon wondered whether this new approach was just a passing trend, or the effect of a change in social mores; he also wondered about the reason why an individual would turn to the courts to protect the environment, and about the types of cases that are of interest to the public. While leaving the subject open to discussion, he observed that the diversity of the actions instituted and the scope of the decisions handed down by the courts have started to make a difference in environmental matters.

CONCLUSION

In the industrial world, the representatives of the agriculture and transportation sectors are thinking about how their activities affect the environment. They agree that they will have to take direct action to meet future environmental challenges. On the other hand, although there have been positive changes in some public practices, it remains crucial for both leaders and the public to change their attitude in order to counteract the deterioration of the biosphere and limit the social repercussions of that deterioration. A number of possible solutions were presented during the conference: applying the principle of prudence on a large scale, localized action motivated by a global vision, and a change in government structures to ensure joint efforts on the part of everyone affected, whether directly or indirectly, by the issues of the 21st century. All solutions to environmental problems have a common thread: evaluating the issues in terms of their global repercussions. The years to come will tell us whether this movement will be successful in bringing about the profound changes in government structures which could have an effect on government departments of the environment.