

Conference Reports: ECO/ECO pushes comparative risk project forward

Maine Policy Review (1992). Volume 1, Number 2

by Christopher Spruce

In the continuing public policy debate over finding the appropriate balance between economy and ecology, there are some who believe collaborative efforts by the parties to the debate might well lead to constructive problem-solving in the short term. These efforts also may result in developing useful conflict management mechanisms for the long term. Obviously, there are value-based positions involved in the economy-versus-ecology debate which do not lend themselves to collaborative decision-making. But the recent history of environmental conflict resolution suggests there is a useful role for both collaborative approaches and conflict management mechanisms in the policy process, as well as in site-specific disputes.¹

The annual ECO/ECO Conference (now in its third year) is one example of such a collaborative effort. ECO/ECO (Ecology and Economy) is a collection of more than 100 individuals representing a variety of perspectives in the economy-versus-ecology conflict. Coordinated by professional staff at College of the Atlantic, the group includes business leaders, environmental advocates, state officials, and academics. Its purpose is to provide a forum for the exchange of views on the relationship of economics and ecology in Maine's future and to seek consensus on both goals and the methods of achieving them.

Seeking consensus, of course, is a most difficult task, even when those who often do battle with each other in the policy arena lay down their weapons. It is an accomplishment of no small significance that the 75 participants at this year's Sugarloaf conference discussed and debated issues in which they all have a critical interest in a cordial and respectful way. This seems all the more remarkable when you understand there is a sincerity of purpose and a shared belief that something has to be done before the cost of the systemic paralysis gripping the state's policy processes outstrips our ability to break the gridlock through the application of both political and fiscal resources.

Setting environmental priorities

ECO/ECO has endeavored to move beyond discussion and debate. Working in conjunction with the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, the group has committed itself to a process to establish environmental priorities for the state. These priorities would result from a two-year comparative risk evaluation project, similar to that used by other states such as Vermont and Washington. (In fact, Rick Minard, who directs the Vermont Law School-based Northeast Center for Comparative Risk and who played a significant role in formulating Vermont's environmental priorities project,² is assisting a 12-member committee formed by ECO/ECO to explore ways to approach environmental priorities.) The Maine project will be unique in that it is the first "born in a coalition," said Rick Minard. "This gives it a much higher chance of success."

Dan Boxer, a Portland attorney who represents businesses in environmental litigation, suggested that underlying the priorities-setting project is a desire to effect change in the public policy process. The debate can continue as one in which environmental policy is made on the basis of uninformed opinion, biases, legislative whimsy, and anti-business attitudes, or it can be transformed into one in which "good science" provides the basis for informed decision-making and one in which the risks of various environmental impacts are prioritized. "We cannot afford all the environmental protection we want," said Boxer, "and from an economic standpoint, we are running a big risk with the business community of this state. I don't think they can accept any more environmental costs."

Whether or not that last observation is believed by all parties to this process, everyone seems to agree that the current public policy process for environmental regulation is not satisfactory to anyone. That this process has not, to our knowledge, been objectively evaluated underscores Boxer's concern about informed decision-making. "The problem we all face is making decisions with a lack of information," said Minard. "This project won't solve that, but it will alleviate it somewhat and provide a process."

Project goals

ECO/ECO lists four specific goals for the project: First, to identify and compare environmental problems facing Maine related to human, ecological and economic health. Second, to establish priorities based on the threats identified in the first phase. Third, to stimulate the development of risk management strategies and the formulation of public policy that effectively uses public and private resources. And, fourth, to improve governance in environmental and economic affairs and in the process, to build a long-term public-private collaboration for environmental decision-making.

The success of the priorities-setting effort, according to DEP Commissioner Dean Marriott, depends on the priorities being acceptable to the public and their elected representatives. "We must involve the public from the beginning," he said. One way in which public involvement will be achieved is through "town meetings" during the early stages of the project.

The comparative risk process will be guided by a 25-member steering committee, an executive committee, and three technical committees, which will provide the steering committee with recommendations related to public health, ecological health, and quality of life. The initial \$170,000 annual budget will be built upon a \$50,000 per year grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The remainder of project funding must be raised from other sources.

The project is expected to begin in September 1992 and take up to two years to complete. The project's Advisory Committee will provide a final report on comparative environmental risk and priorities to the governor and the DEP. The report's intended audiences include policymakers who must determine which environmental risks and problems should be addressed by public resources and the business leaders who must consider the same relative to the use of private resources.

As Boxer noted in his reference to basing decisions on good science, a central objective of the project is to expand and make more accessible and relevant environmental databases. Such data bases, kept updated and checked for accuracy, will assist policy makers in the ongoing environmental priorities process.

Christopher Spruce

Endnotes:

1. See Gail Bingham, *Resolving Environmental Disputes: A Decade of Experience*. Washington, D.C.: The Conservation Law Foundation, 1986; William Fulton, "Reaching Consensus in Land Use Negotiations," American Planning Association, Planning Advisory Service Report, No. 417, 1989; and, Barbara Gray, *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publications, 1989.
2. See Rick Minard's article in Volume 1 of Maine Policy Review, "A focus on risk: States reconsider their environmental priorities," pp. 13-27.

Full cite: Spruce, Christopher. 1992. *Conference Reports: ECO/ECO pushes comparative risk project forward.* Vol. 1(2): 87-89.