POLLUTION: CAN OUR ENVIRONMENT BE SAVED?

by Congressman George E. Brown, Jr.

Mr. BROWN of California. Mr. Speaker, almost every thoughtful citizen of this country realizes that we face great problems in preventing further deterioration of our environment, to say nothing of restoring it to conditions of an earlier generation.

That awareness is reflected daily in the growing number of complaints from individuals concerning situations in their own communities, complaints which, I am sure, every Member has received. The increasing literature on pollution, the changing attitudes of many organizations as they focus on the problem, including conservationists, scientific and professional organizations, and political groupings, also reflect this growing awareness.

Congress is not insensitive to this growing pressure, and has, in fact been at work through many of its committees, and through the enactment of much legislation, in efforts to reach solutions.

POISONING OF OUR ENVIRONMENT

It is probably unnecessary for me to cite detailed examples of how serious the situation has become. There is hardly a major urban area in which air pollution does not degrade the quality of living—and there are many, such as my own city of Los Angeles, in which it imperils life, property and normal workings of the community. Because this poisoning of the atmosphere increases slowly and insidiously over a long period of time—more than 25 years in the case of Los Angeles—corrective action has always been characterized as “too little and too late.”

Pollution of our Nation’s water supply has likewise crept up on us unaware. Major rivers and lakes are great sewers, water in them unfit for human consumption, or even human contact in most cases. This blight has spread to underground water sources in many areas, and increasingly we find the oceans themselves beginning to show the impact of man’s disregard for his environment.

The land suffers its own kinds of damage. Waste products of civilization spread over it. Garbage, rubbish, old autos—
eliminating this pollution. This require-
ment in itself may have a healthy effect
in changing the overall sense of values
about certain kinds of economic activi-
ties and products.

Our immediate peril is that already we
may be "too little and too late" as seems
to be the case in Los Angeles with its
smog problem. I hope through my efforts
to focus attention on these issues—now,
by legislation and in other ways—to
avoid that peril. And in the process, it
may help create the more humane en-
vironment which we all desire and need.

THE OMNIBUS ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT

Today, I am introducing legislation
establishing what I consider the strong-
est program yet set before the Congress
to determine national concern and na-
tional machinery to maintain environ-
mental quality. I term my bill the "Om-
nibus Environmental Quality Act of
1969" because it brings together series
of policies and tools—all of which I feel
are necessities in this crucial area.

The bill contains the Declaration of
National Environmental Policy already
passed by the Senate; this policy objec-
tive is both comprehensive and powerful.
In its key statement it recognizes that
each person "has a fundamental and in-
alienable right to a healthful environ-
ment and that each person has a respon-
sibility to contribute to preservation and
enhancement of the environment."

The ultimate fate of Government con-
trol of environmental quality largely will
be determined by the mechanism set up
to do the job. At present, there is a
proliferation of authority to act in a
number of different Federal agencies. The
Agriculture Department deals with pes-
ticides, for instance, while the Interior
Department deals with lakes and streams
and the Coast Guard deals with coastal
pollution. The Secretary of Health, Edu-
cation, and Welfare administers the air
pollution laws.

Such diffusion of Government man-
agement of the environment has been
one reason that serious problems have
gone almost unnoticed until they
are so large that they can no longer be
avoided. Better coordination and regu-
atory power is imperative if Government
can successfully act to contain the ever-
mounting attacks on the environment.
For that reason, my bill proposes a
permanent National Commission for
Environmental Protection, a regulatory
agency for environmental affairs similar
to already existing agencies which deal
with other functional areas.

The five man commission would have
the continuing responsibility:
To review proposed projects, facilities,
programs, policies and activities of the
Federal Government which may ad-
versely affect environmental quality;
To review and appraise existing pro-
jects, facilities programs, policies and
activities of the Federal Government
which affect environmental quality and
make recommendations with respect
thereto to the President and the
Congress;
To set priorities with respect to prob-
lems involving environmental quality;
To advise the President on matters in-
volving environmental quality and to
make recommendations to him with re-
spect thereto;
To collect, analyze, bring together, col-
late, digest, interpret and disseminate
data and information, in such form as
it seems appropriate, to public agencies,
private organizations, and the general
public;
To conduct studies and research, by
contract or otherwise, into problems and
other matters involving or relating to en-
vironmental quality;
To develop criteria and promulgate
standards defining desirable levels of
environmental quality;
To consult with and advise other rep-
representatives of governments, and to utilize, with their consent, the services of Federal agencies and, with the consent of any State or political subdivision thereof, accept and utilize the services of the agencies of such State or subdivision;

To assist the President by clearing and coordinating departmental policies and activities affecting environmental quality;

To assist in the consideration and, where necessary, in the preparation of proposed Executive orders and proclamations affecting environmental quality;

To keep the President informed of the progress of activities by agencies of the Federal Government with respect to work proposed, work actually initiated and work completed by any such agencies which affect environmental quality;

To assist the President in efforts to achieve environmental quality in the community of nations; and

Where appropriate, to participate in behalf of the public interest as an intervenor in proceedings before State and Federal courts and administrative agencies.

The situation in Congress regarding the environment is greatly similar to that within the Executive agencies; it is horribly fragmented and uncoordinated. Short of comprehensive congressional reform and reshuffling of functional activities, I do not foresee major changes coming at the committee level. However, I do feel that we can better coordinate and plan congressional policies regarding the environment, and for that reason, I propose establishing a Joint Congressional Committee on Environmental Quality. The Joint Committee would: conduct a comprehensive study and investigation of appropriate matters contained in any environmental quality report transmitted to the Congress and recommend any such studies and investigations to the appropriate standing committees of the Congress; and make an annual report to the Congress and the appropriate committees of Congress on or before March 1 of each year on environmental quality.

Government activities must be synchronized with activities ongoing in the private sector if we are to achieve a complete national program for environmental control. Certainly, I feel that the indignation and anger I have seen coming from my constituents over the past months indicates that a large amount of alienation already exists over these issues. As with many other topics of both national and local concern, individual citizens feel they are left out when it comes to making decisions and acting on problems of the environment.

Therefore, my bill also contains a Citizens Advisory Committee on Environmental Quality. This committee would be composed of 15 members selected from Government and private sector, and hopefully would include representation from concerned citizen's groups.

The committee would report at least once each year to the President and to the Environmental Quality Commission on the state and condition of the environment; provide advice, assistance, and staff support to the President on the formulation of national policies to foster and promote the improvement of environmental quality; and obtain information using existing sources, to the greatest extent practicable, concerning the quality of the environment and make such information available to the public.

I believe this omnibus environmental quality bill would provide the direct and broad-based effort which is essential if we are to maintain and improve the world around us. I hope all my colleagues take a serious look at this approach and I hope to receive their support for it.