

Closing Remarks by Bill Diamond
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At the 2003 National Source Water Protection Conference

My initial reaction is that it's been a great conference. Please still fill out your evaluations. One of the reasons that I think it's a great conference is that we've already kind of fulfilled what we'd hoped when we set out this plan for this conference about a year ago, some of the goals that we had.

One of our first goals was basically just to get a bunch of people together who were engaged in source water protection at whatever stage: right at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end, or national experts. And basically so that we could have a forum to discuss and exchange ideas and I think we've been very successful at doing that over the last couple of days. So we're pleased with that.

The second thing was to try and make it valuable to the attendees, not only to share ideas, but to allow them to take something home: new tools, new ideas, and a new context - and I think we've also been successful at that. So we're pretty pleased with that.

The third one was, given where we are in the source water protection program, in terms of kind of a milestone of wrapping up the assessments and moving ahead to protection, was to try to build some energy and momentum in terms of moving on to that next difficult phase of actually implementing protection on the ground where it doesn't exist now. And only time's going to tell, only your efforts are going to tell, whether or not we're successful at that, but I think we've got a good launch in terms of moving down that path.

I'm kind of optimistic that we're going to get there. And I'm optimistic despite being a character pessimist after working in government and the fact that there's always causes for pessimism. Whenever you get some experts together, you get to hear some of those challenges and barriers that we all face. We all know huge numbers that we're facing; a hundred sixty thousand of anything - that's how many source water protection numbers we've got out there - is a very daunting, daunting task.

It's also interesting when there are no commonalities, that they're all very different, these are locally-driven types of things. We've got a lot of challenges and a lot of reasons for concern, in terms of whether or not we can get there. We've got some lack of tools in some cases, we've got too many demands, and we've got questions in terms of budget cuts and financing that we've heard about. And one of the things is that even some of the solutions are hard. We've all heard about value of partnerships here, but partnerships are essential, but they're also difficult. They're difficult because partners often have strong opinions and don't always agree. We've heard some of that in this conference, too.

It was driven home to me a little bit by a story that somebody had told me during the conference, and that was about some people who were going out and doing source water assessments; it was a team of four assessors who were going around, going from town to town doing these assessments. Three of them were EPA experts, one of them was a State expert. So they're going from town to town doing

these assessments and there's this subjective nature to assessments. And town after town, they're doing these assessments and there's a disagreement amongst the assessors. The three EPA people think one thing and this poor State assessor, an expert, thinks something completely different. So he goes from town to town and he's always being outvoted. Well, he finally gets to this one town and the same thing happens, the vote is 3 to 1 in terms of what it is that is needed for source water protection plan and he's had it up to here. So he finally says, "I know I'm right," so he appeals to a higher Nature. He says, "O God, give me a sign to show these EPA people that I'm right." And it's a beautiful sunny day, all of a sudden a cloud, a dark cloud, comes shooting over, right towards the assessors, and very dark, and there's a big grumble and then it disappears. And the State guy's ecstatic; he says, "This is tremendous! You know, that's the sign!" And the EPA people were more skeptical, "Storms happen in the summer, and this and that." So he says, "God, I need a bigger sign." And this time four clouds appear and they all come from different parts of the sky, join together in the middle, and a big lightning bolt comes down and strikes the tree right next to him. Well, the State guy says, "That's a sign!" The EPA guys, they're a little shaken, but they're not impressed. They say, "Eh, it still could be natural causes, we're experts, we know what's going on." So they're not impressed. And the State guy, he's finally, he's just, he's fed up. He says, "Oh, I need a REALLY big sign," so he says, "O God," and before he can even get the words out, the sky turns dark, it's all clouds, and a big voice comes out that says, "HE'S RIGHT." The State guys' ecstatic, and he turns to them and says, "Well?" And the EPA guys say, "Well, the vote's still 3 to 2."

So, it's difficult, but there's hope. We'll get there. We can work with partnerships and we can make it happen, but one of the great things about these conferences is that despite the obstacles and the challenges that we can come up with, is that there's a great cause for optimism and the positive is emphasized as much as the negative. And that's part of the reason, as what I've learned, is that drinking water professionals, public health professionals, are problem solvers. They may recognize the problems, but they, by their nature, go out there and solve those types of problems.

And we've heard a lot of the positive things over the last couple of days. We heard Senator Simon as keynote in the beginning talking about, not only reminding us of the critical nature of the work that's being done, but also that small things can change the world. And that's something that all of those small things add up and I think that's a very positive thing that we've seen by example so far.

Tracy Mehan, in his opening remarks, gave us a lot of ideas about partnerships and things to do and things that EPA will do, but what he also noted was that he was very, very impressed as a long-term government official of the successes that we've had. We look ahead to the barriers, but often we don't look back to the successes. And in just a very short period of time with limited resources, and basically dedication and hard work, we've gathered tens of thousands of source water assessments nationwide that are going to drive the engine of protection for the next couple of years. And that's an enormous, enormous success. And that shows what can be accomplished and I think that's very, very positive and reasons for optimism now.

We had Susan Seacrest, who talked to us about not only the value of partnerships, but also, by her example, showed what one single, committed individual can do to bring enormous success and that's an example of a role model for all of us. And that's a positive as well.

I've heard the speech before, but this morning Dr. Griffiths reminded us, in very graphic terms, makes communication on my level very helpful, in terms of not all of public health protection is not just a slogan, but that it's a real and present and pressing concern, and we can't lose touch with it. It is the only reason any of us are doing any of those types of things and that's the type of message that we all have to get out as eloquently and hopefully, but certainly as forcefully as Dr. Griffiths did this morning.

This morning's panel was also very good in terms of thinking, making us think how we can move forward and that there are paths to protection that are doable and achievable through partnerships and through individual efforts and I think that was very upbeat and optimistic.

The breakout sessions, the resource fair, and even the reception that was beautiful on the first night up there, sponsored by the NRWA, gave me an increased appreciation of the power that we have as opposed to limitations. We have the power of information to direct and to motivate action. We've got the power of technology—this is a non-technical program, but when you're looking at cleaning up the sources of contamination, or BMPs, or other things, that there's a lot out there that's in-hand that people can do and it can be relatively simple to reinforce source water protection.

We also heard a lot about the power of partnerships—sharing, leveraging—that together, we can do more than individually we can do and that people are willing to be partners. We may have to facilitate, we may have to connect, but once we get them together, then the energy is there.

We've also got the power of efficiency and that goes to EPA in terms of program integration. We've got a great presence from our Clean Water Act partners in terms of “let's take those tools we've got and use them for multiple purposes,” so we don't have to start from scratch, and that's a powerful message that we can harness and move it everywhere.

We've also heard from a number of people that it's not just us, that it's the power of watchful, and informed, and engaged citizens. And they're throughout the country. Some of the surveys that we've heard about in terms of people wanting to protect their resource if only they knew how. That's a great thing to be able to tap into and there's some resistance and there's a lot of demands on people, but once you reach that, then it almost takes off on its own.

I guess one of the most important messages I had, and I keep getting reinforced on this, is the power of individuals again. And we learned that from the infectious enthusiasm and commitment from the people who are sitting right next to you at the tables. We had a lot of time to sit there and talk and engage and they were just little snippets, but I hope you got the same enthusiasm and commitment I picked up from our neighbors here in terms of not only what they're doing, but what they're committed to do. And that's tremendous.

And we've shared terrific experiences here at the conference, as is the nature of these conferences, and we've had some opportunities to talk, but I don't think my experience was unique and I ran into a bunch of great people, some new, some I had known. I talked to a woman from Washington state who's doing some great work up in Ferry County educating kids and getting them to motivate their parents to ration water.

I talked to a gentleman from Cohasset, Massachusetts who gave me, its bottled tap water that he's using to educate his public that the value of their source water is not bottled, but it's their tap water, and being creative there.

I talked to the people from Connecticut, who put on a great conference for their local political leaders to say not only "Here's your assessment," but, "Here's what you have to do to it, to motivate and get people on it."

I talked to another woman from the state of Utah who's working with the people in the Virgin River, it's out in a very rural type of area, and engaging them in protection. And there were a dozen of other examples. I'm sure each one of you heard some of that here and I hope you take that home not only as models and examples, but as inspiration in terms of we're in this together, it's in all our hands and, collectively, we'll be able to do that.

So I'm optimistic. I'm optimistic even after hearing the woman from Seattle. And I say that because as I looked around the room and she talked about, you know, she's got 99 percent ownership of her source water, there were a lot of people mumbling under their breaths, "I wish that were my watershed." And I think we all wish that was our watershed. We're not blessed with that type of stuff. But the reason they have that watershed is because a hundred years ago, a hundred fifty years ago, they had some visionaries. They had some visionaries who knew the importance of what was going on there and were willing to take small incremental steps over time, take advantage of opportunities, to make something today that everybody wishes they had.

And we can't go back in time, but if we've learned anything from this conference is that we have to take the long view. Forget somewhat about the statutory requirement, forget the short-term vision of the politician, think in terms of the long term. Ten years from now, people are going to need clean drinking water. Fifty years from now, people are going to need clean water. They're going to need clean drinking water as long as there are people on this planet. There's an old saying that the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second best time is today. And the people in this room, and our colleagues, are the visionaries for tomorrow. And if we work together to tap the energy to do our individual steps, it cumulatively will have enormous success and a hundred years from now, people won't remember our name, but they'll remember the accomplishments. And that's very, very significant.

So, I hope you'll take from this small things, large things. I hope you'll take new friends, new partners. I hope you'll share my optimism and I know you share my commitment. Together, we're going to achieve this objective, despite the obstacles, and we're going to enormously advance public health protection in this country for generations to come. I thank you for your participation, thank you for your efforts, give yourselves a round of applause, and the next time we get together, we will have advanced public health protection a lot further down the path to protection. Thank you very much.