

GROUPS: SIERRA CLUB MEMBERS CAUTIONED ABOUT IMMIGRATION AGENDAS

Greenwire

March 23, 2004 Tuesday

Copyright 2004 Environment and Energy Publishing, LLC

Section: SOCIETY; Vol. 10; No. 9

Length: 2186 words

Body

Natalie M. Henry, Greenwire reporter

PORTLAND, Ore. -- Elections for the Sierra Club's board of directors kicked off last week with an unusual notice in the mail urging all club members to vote this year, and vote carefully.

According to the board's majority members, "non-environmental" organizations committed to U.S. immigration reform are trying to take over the club's agenda. Such groups, according to the notice, include the Center for American Unity, Federation for American Immigration Reform and White Politics Inc.

"These outside organizations have endorsed club board candidates and are urging their supporters to join the club as a means to influence club policy in line with their non-environmental agendas," the notice states.

Moreover, the groups are capitalizing on the Sierra Club's clout to push an agenda driven by anti-immigration sentiment, the notice states.

"The Sierra Club has become an even more influential and effective voice in American society over the last decade. Now it appears that non-environmental groups are trying to take advantage of the club's open and democratic nature to influence the composition of our board of directors and our policies," says to the notice.

Immigration has always been a politically and emotionally charged issue for Americans, but never before has an environmental group of the Sierra Club's stature been subject to such internal conflict over its direction and core values. The board election, which began last week and ends on April 21, will fill one-third, or five of 15, director's seats.

Several current board members, like Ben Zuckerman of Southern California, already support immigration controls. "I would like to see the club membership repeal its policy on neutrality and for the club to take a position on U.S. immigration policies," he said, adding that the club should speak openly on immigration "just like it speaks openly about commercial logging in national forests or protection wetlands."

Zuckerman, a professor of astronomy at the University of California-Los Angeles, is also on the board of FAIR and Californians for Population Stabilization, and is a member of Sierrans for U.S. Population Stabilization (Greenwire, March 22).

Dick Lamm, the former governor of Colorado and one of this year's board candidates endorsed by SUSPS, said without population controls, including caps on immigration, the club's broader mission of environmental protection is doomed.

GROUPS: SIERRA CLUB MEMBERS CAUTIONED ABOUT IMMIGRATION AGENDAS

"I think the Sierra Club could win every one of its battles it's fighting right now and win every one of its battles for the next 50 years, and if it ignored population it would be a pyrrhic victory," said Lamm, who is also involved in FAIR and Coloradans for American Immigration Reform.

But Lamm and Zuckerman are not just worried about the effects immigration-fueled population growth have on the environment. They are also concerned about immigration's effects on overcrowded schools and the economy. They charge that the influx of immigrants, particularly from Mexico and Central America, is eroding the job base for U.S. citizens who lack the education or skills to fill high-wage professional jobs. Immigrants have been particularly adept at gaining employment in the construction, agriculture, food service and hospitality sectors, according to economic experts, and their cultural and economic imprint is growing more present across the United States.

But in order to get Congress to address the issues of immigration and pass serious immigration reform legislation, the anti-immigration movement needs more Democrats and liberal politicians on board. Enter the Sierra Club, an organization traditionally aligned with the political left.

POPULATION STABILIZATION VS. IMMIGRATION REFORM

Currently, 1 million immigrants enter the United States legally each year. Another half million enter illegally. Nearly all anti-immigration activists want illegal immigration to cease. Opinions on legal immigration run the gamut from banning it altogether to limiting it to 500,000 people per year. Most of the club candidates who are vocal on immigration issues endorse the latter position, tighter federal controls but not a sealing of borders.

The Sierra Club's general policy calls for reducing population growth worldwide, but the focus of that policy is on the developing world, where annual births greatly outpace deaths, resulting in a myriad of health problems and significant environmental strain. By contrast, the United States has much more balanced birth and mortality rates, rendering domestic population growth a second-tier issue.

While overseas the Sierra Club supports international family planning, education for women and other programs aimed at reducing reproduction rates, the club focuses its U.S. efforts on consumption of natural resources and the generation of billions of tons of waste. Anti-immigration environmentalists have cited the domestic consumption issue when arguing for reforms.

"The last thing the ecosystem needs is 300 million more consuming Americans," Lamm said.

According to the most recent census, the United States will add 130 million more people by 2050 for a total of 420 million, all due to immigration. Anti-immigration leader and Michigan resident John Tanton said, "That's like 13 new Michigans." Tanton, who also has environmental roots, added, "What does that mean for the conservation movement? Where's the oil going to come from? Where's the water going to come from?"

Since 1996, the Sierra Club has taken a neutral position on immigration policy. According to Jennifer Ferenstein, a club board member serving her last term, immigration is just too divisive for the Sierra Club, adding that most of the dialogue on immigration reform involves social, not environmental, issues.

"The issue of whether the club should move off its position of neutrality on immigration issues has been a painful dialogue in the club, and it has a whole bunch of dimensions to it," Ferenstein said. For example, "Is the club going to take a position on immigrants having licenses? What about children born to immigrants becoming U.S. citizens?" she added.

If it becomes a major issue for the club, Ferenstein said the immigration debate could erode consensus on environmental issues among members and consume a disproportionate amount of the club's time and money. "We could spend lots of resources and increase divisiveness in club, or we could protect our core values like clean air and clean water," she said.

Larry Fahn, president of the board, noted that a number of candidates running in this year's election did not petition to be on the ballot, as was the case with the anti-immigration candidates, but were nominated by a board committee for their long service to the club and its goals.

GROUPS: SIERRA CLUB MEMBERS CAUTIONED ABOUT IMMIGRATION AGENDAS

"The club has been electing members to its board for over 100 years and the tradition has been to elect people who have come up through the ranks," Fahn said. "The best board members have been those with a wide range of experience within our organization."

Fahn noted that Zuckerman and two other board members endorsed by the immigration reform group SUSPS in 2001 -- Paul Watson, founder of Greenpeace and an animal rights activist, and Doug LaFollette, former Wisconsin secretary of state -- had no serious club experience before joining the board.

SUSPS has endorsed five of the 16 candidates running this year for seats on the board. Some of those have taken strong anti-immigration positions, including Lamm, Frank Morris and Doug Pimentel, a professor of ecology and agricultural sciences at Cornell University. The others have said they are open to discussing the issue and would consider backing away from the club's neutrality position.

In a backlash by some club traditionalists, many of the anti-immigration candidates have been tainted by accusations of racism, a charge each has denied. Lamm notes that he has done humanitarian work all over the world and received awards for it. Norris is a former director of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.

But one watchdog of racist organizations, the Montgomery, Ala.-based Southern Poverty Law Center, notes that some organizations endorsing anti-immigration candidates for Sierra Club seats endorse policies SPLC considers racist.

Morris Dees, director and founder of SPLC, is running for the club's board himself, although he said he does not actually seek a position. Rather he wants to draw attention to the goals of the other candidates. His ballot ultimately urges members to withhold votes for Lamm, Norris or Pimentel. In his ballot statement, Dees asks members to vote against the "greening of hate."

Ferenstein noted that the club's current position on population -- supporting worldwide stabilization but remaining neutral on U.S. immigration -- gets at the root causes of the population problem. U.S. immigration is not the problem, she said. Rather, high reproduction, unsustainable practices and unstable economies and governments elsewhere usually cause people to want to move to the United States. If people had good reason to stay in their own country, they probably would.

"[Our members] are going to decide whether we're going to be an organization dealing with population and the root causes of population problems," which relate to consumption, empowering women and family planning access, she said. "Or are we gonna be more, 'We gotta protect the United States.'"

Lamm agreed that consumption is an issue. But he said the United States should be setting an example for the rest of the world on population stabilization, and part of that involves immigration reform. "The best thing U.S. can do is be an example of sustainability, and that means stabilizing our population and reducing our consumption," he said.

"I think leaving population out of the agenda is like the American Cancer Association leaving smoking out of their agenda or the National Organization for Women leaving abortion out of their agenda," Lamm said.

CHOOSING 'DIFFERENT PATHS'

While immigration has become the most charged issued in the election, some of the candidates also seek to change the club's agenda in regards to animal rights. Board member Watson is an avid animal rights activist who, after founding Greenpeace, left the organization because it was not radical enough. He then founded the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and bought several ocean vessels that he has used to ram and disable whaling boats, among other things.

Watson recently counseled animal rights activists to join the Sierra Club and vote in the board elections to affect change in the organization, saying with more animal rights activists as board members they could completely change the club's agenda. Watson wants the club to abandon its support for hunting and trapping, which the club has resisted because it does not want to alienate sportsmen.

GROUPS: SIERRA CLUB MEMBERS CAUTIONED ABOUT IMMIGRATION AGENDAS

Kim McCoy, a SUSPS-endorsed candidate for the board this year, said she is consistently frustrated because her Chicago chapter of the **Sierra Club** resists promoting vegetarian events. McCoy said she would like the **club** to make more of a connection between how people's diets affect the environment.

Candidates are also questioning the **club**'s anonymous donors. In 2000 and 2001 an anonymous donor gave tens of millions of dollars to the **club**. Only two people know the identity of the donor, the **club**'s treasurer and Ferenstein, who was then president of the board.

Lamm, Morris and Pimentel have criticized the **club** for using such money without disclosing the source of the income. "My point is that it is a breach of fiduciary duty for the **Sierra Club** board to pass a budget when you don't know where the money is coming from," Lamm said. "When a substantial part of your budget comes from anonymous money, you've got to know what strings are attached. So there's something that stinks in the funding of the **Sierra Club**."

Ferenstein counters that having the treasurer and president know the identity of the donor provides appropriate safeguards for the organization. "I think we are adequately balancing the **right** to protect the **club** and make sure we're not taking money from a circumspect source, and balancing the **right** to privacy for the donor," she said.

Zuckerman said the election goes even further than the debate over **immigration**, animal **rights** or funding. It comes down to making the **Sierra Club** more effective, he said.

"I and various other directors and candidates running for the board feel the **club** has been not as effective as it could be at the national level and we need to try some different tactics that we have not been willing or had the courage to follow over the last 10 to 20 years," Zuckerman said.

"We haven't had a good environmental president ... in at least 30 years since President Carter was elected in the 1970s, and we haven't had a suite of environmental legislation passed since the 1970s, and it's all been during the watch of the current executive director or ruling board members," Zuckerman said. "If the **Sierra Club** tried different paths, better paths, perhaps more creative paths, then we might have ended up in a better way than we are **right** now."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newswire

Subject: **IMMIGRATION** (90%); ENVIRONMENTAL & WILDLIFE ORGANIZATIONS (90%); ELECTIONS (90%); **IMMIGRATION** REGULATION & POLICY (90%); BOARDS OF DIRECTORS (90%); CONSERVATION (89%); BOARD CHANGES (89%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (89%); FORESTRY & ENVIRONMENT (78%); POLITICS (78%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (78%); PUBLIC POLICY (76%); FORESTS & WOODLANDS (72%); WETLANDS (72%); PUBLIC LANDS (61%); POPULATION GROWTH (60%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (50%); FOREST RESOURCES MANAGEMENT (50%)

Organization: **SIERRA CLUB** (94%); FEDERATION FOR AMERICAN **IMMIGRATION** REFORM (57%)

Industry: FORESTRY & ENVIRONMENT (78%); LOGGING INDUSTRY (61%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (50%); FOREST RESOURCES MANAGEMENT (50%)

GROUPS: SIERRA CLUB MEMBERS CAUTIONED ABOUT IMMIGRATION AGENDAS

Geographic: LOS ANGELES, CA, USA (79%); PORTLAND, OR, USA (58%); CALIFORNIA, USA (93%); COLORADO, USA (92%); OREGON, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%)

Load-Date: March 23, 2004

End of Document