AGENDA FOR A SUSTAINABLE AMERICA

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More than 15 years have passed since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, or Earth Summit, took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Over 110 heads of state participated, a greater number than had attended any prior international conference. For the first time, the nations of the world endorsed sustainable development. These nations also adopted a plan of action, called Agenda 21, to achieve it, and a set of principles (the Rio Declaration) to guide the effort.

In simple and direct terms, the world's leaders described the challenge we face: "Humanity stands at a defining moment in history. We are confronted with a perpetuation of disparities between and within nations, a worsening of poverty, hunger, ill health and illiteracy, and the continuing deterioration of the ecosystems on which we depend for our well-being." They then described the opportunity that sustainable development provides, asserting that it "will lead to the fulfillment of basic needs, improved living standards for all, better protected and managed ecosystems and a safer, more prosperous future."

Each nation made a commitment at the Earth Summit: to work to achieve sustainable development within its own borders and as part of its international activities. One of those countries, under the leadership of President George H.W. Bush, was the United States.

This book is the third review in an ongoing project to evaluate U.S. efforts for sustainable development and make recommendations for future actions. The reviews have occurred on or after the fifth, tenth, and fifteenth anniversaries of the Earth Summit. These anniversaries are worth marking because the Earth Summit was not just another international meeting; it put sustainability—one of the 20th century's most important ideas—on the world's stage.

The first review, conducted with the help of my students in a seminar at Widener University School of Law, was published as an article by the *Environmental Law Reporter*. Much to my surprise, given the intense attention that the Earth Summit had received, it was the only assessment by anyone outside of government on the U.S. performance during those five years.

The second review, *Stumbling Toward Sustainability*, was published by the Environmental Law Institute just before the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002.² It contains chapters written by more than three dozen experts. Each chapter focused on a particular topic, evaluated U.S. progress in the decade following the Earth Summit, and made recommendations for the next five to ten years.

Agenda for a Sustainable America follows the 15-year anniversary of the Earth Summit. It has the same essential structure as Stumbling Toward Sustainability, but it focuses on the period since 2002. Like the previous book, it also makes recommendations for the next five to ten years. The contributors to this volume have considerable knowledge and experience as well as a range of perspectives. They are from universities, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector. They also represent a range of disciplines. Their willingness to contribute to this volume indicates the importance of the subject.

This book has both critical and constructive components. It is intended to provide a critical appraisal of U.S. activities, indentifying both progress and shortcomings. It is also intended to be constructive, primarily by making recommendations. The broader aim of the book is to help build an analytical and policy foundation for sustainable development in the United States, not only for specific issues and problems but also as a conceptual framework for achieving prosperity and human well-being.

Agenda for a Sustainable America was written before the current economic downturn, yet the severe financial problems the world faces make this book's recommendations more urgent than ever. When we make decisions for sustainability, we make decisions that improve our economic situation, create jobs, improve our infrastructure, enhance environmental quality, and increase our security. In other words, decisions for sustainability give us more value for the investments we make than if we are seeking only economic growth. That makes sense in any situation, but is of particular importance during difficult economic times.

Agenda was also written before the recent presidential election. New administrations provide an opportunity to revisit premises and start afresh. Much of this book could be useful in that effort because many chapters focus on the role of the executive branch in achieving sustainability. Of course, the book is not just about the federal

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government or about governance at any level. It is also for all of us in our various roles—as citizens, family members, employees, volunteers, teachers, and students, and as members and leaders of many organizations.

A great many people have inspired and supported this project over the years. The Environmental Law Institute continues to be the publisher; its support has made this effort possible. For this volume, Don Brown, Marian Chertow, Scott Schang, and Marianne Tyrrell have been particularly helpful. Peter Whitten proved to be an exceptionally able and wise editor. Paula Heider, Kim Peterson, and Jessica Snyder afforded secretarial and administrative support. Diane Goltz and Ed Sonnenberg helped locate difficult sources. Allison Miles provided useful research assistance. Special thanks to Josh Hooper for taking the photo on p. xiii. Becky Dernbach proved to be an exceptionally good proofreader. As always, my wife, Kathy Yorkievitz, has been a constant source of support and useful advice. Finally, the contributing authors to this book are its greatest strength, and they have my deepest gratitude.

ENDNOTES

- John Dernbach & the Widener University Law School Seminar on Law and Sustainability, U.S. Adherence to Its Agenda 21 Commitments: A Five-Year Review, 27 Envtl. L. Rep. (Envtl. L. Inst.) 10504 (Oct. 1997).
- 2. Stumbling Toward Sustainability (John C. Dernbach ed. 2002).

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John C. Dernbach is a Distinguished Professor of Law at Widener University in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He has written widely on sustainable development, climate change, and environmental law. He edited *Stumbling Toward Sustainability* (Environmental Law Institute 2002), which assessed U.S. sustainable development efforts in the first decade after the Earth Summit and made recommendations for the next 5 to 10 years. Before taking his

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