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OSPIRG pressures agencies

By Daniel West
Oregon Daily Emerald

OSPIRG, a student group that advocates environmental issues and consumer rights, is challenging some government agencies.

The group is pressuring agencies to spend more time and money on researching environmentally safe programs. OSPIRG is asking students to write to their House representatives to encourage support of legislation and programs aimed at increasing energy efficiency, such as House Resolution 188 which promises a 30 percent increase in energy efficiency nationwide by the year 2010.

Lauren Siegal, OSPIRG campus staff person, said both the local chapter of OSPIRG and other national chapters became involved in the energy issue last year after President Bill Clinton reneged on campaign promises to increase Corporate Automobile Fuel Efficiency standards.

"We don't expect Clinton to shift money to environmentally safe programs, but we hope to move this issue up on his list of priorities," Siegal said.

OSPIRG members say they believe that big business utilizes the earth's natural resources such as oil, coal and gas and nuclear power without regard for the long-term effects.

Many federal agencies financially support the businesses. Members of the student group say many of the hazardous effects are apparent and increasing in some major cities.

For example, the smog and acid rain that blanket some cities are in violation of federal air pollution standards. The pollutants are chiefly caused by excessive automobile use and power plants.

Global warming, set off by the deterioration of the earth's ozone layer, is caused by the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil and natural gas. This burning of fuels produces greenhouse gas that slowly disintegrates the earth's ozone layer, which protects the earth's environment from the sun's harmful rays. Without this layer the earth's temperature would rise dramatically.

Also, nuclear power produces a large amount of radioactive waste, which is active for thousands of years. Exposure to this material is very harmful, and often this material is stored deep underground in protective caverns.

However, there have been leaks of this material into nearby rivers and streams, contaminating the water and poisoning the sea life and people who live by these waterways. These are only a few of the many hazardous effects that are caused by mistreatment of energy by some businesses.

OSPIRG wants government agencies to spend more money and time on research that will help reduce pollution, rather than subsidize businesses that contaminate the environment. The student group has derived a couple of measures that could be enacted, such as House Resolution 188.

This resolution says that increasing the efficiency of cars to 34 miles per gallon and light trucks to 45 mpg will help the automobiles burn less oil. By increasing these standards, the United States would become less dependent on foreign countries for oil.

OSPIRG proposes that government agencies should eliminate tax breaks for oil and gas drilling.

Also, it proposes that nuclear power plants should be eliminated in the near future.

"Clinton promised to increase CAFE standards to 45 miles per gallon. He did nothing," Siegal said. "We have the technology to do it, but it doesn't happen. I feel that he made a lot of campaign promises, but he didn't want to step on anyone's toes. So, the best way to watch him is through small grass-roots efforts. We have the expertise to get the job done. We want the president and Congress to hear our concerns."

Although OSPIRG hasn't faced any direct opposition from other groups, it still realizes that there are some political parties that object to OSPIRG's ideas. In Washington some parties are giving large amounts of money to congressional campaigns. In return, Congress subsidizes their needs, including those of businesses that pollute the environment, but these businesses still fail to incorporate programs that will aid the environment.

However, big business isn't the only one to blame for the inefficient use of energy. Group members say the American public is partially at fault.

They believe this nation has a strong reliance on natural energy. The United States uses far more energy than it needs and wastes the earth's limited resources such as oil and gas. Americans should be more conscious about how much energy they use, Siegal said.

Siegal added there are many everyday things that people can do to become more energy efficient. For example, people can turn off lights, dress in layers to keep warm and ride a bike instead of driving a few blocks.

Also, OSPIRG wants electric utilities to provide financial incentives and assistance to customers for using energy more efficiently. The public and big business should concentrate on renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power, as well.

The student group urges everyone to become involved in this issue because it not only affects people of today, but future generations as well.

"Students are at a point in their lives that they can make a difference. They can use their creative energy and optimism to change the future," Siegal said.

"We're currently paying for the problems of older generations. But we must also think about the future generations — our children who will inherit the earth. I strongly believe in stopping a problem before it's created. It's a lot less to clean up later."

Siegal said students seem to be very interested in this idea, because within three hours of setting up tables in the EMU, more than 200 people had petitioned to write to their House representatives.

Siegal said there are many other ways that students can become involved. For instance, people can participate in programs through the local OSPIRG office.

OSPIRG has programs such as project groups that educate other students about various issues concerning the environment and consumer rights. The student group has scheduled a general interest meeting for all students Sunday at 6:30 p.m. in the EMU Ben Linder Room.



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