

EARTH DAY 1990: DANCING

BY ANDREW SELTSER

Twenty years ago this month, in April 1970, people around the country organized against corporate polluters and their destruction of the planet: they called it Earth Day.

Earth Day 1970 (and 1990) organizer Denis Hayes told corporations back then that the people were "tired of being told that we are to blame for corporate degradations. . . ."

"We will not appeal any more to the conscience of institutions, because institutions have no conscience," Hayes proclaimed. "If we want them to do what is right. . . We will use whatever it takes. This may be our last chance. . . . If environmentalism is a fad, it's going to be our last fad."

Today, Earth Day 1990 Committees around the country are engaged in a flirtatious dance with corporations in an attempt to fund and organize a massive eco-event while retaining a necessary degree of environmental credibility.

While the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day is designed to usher in a decade of increased environmental awareness for large numbers of people, it may in fact be ushering in a strange new political world where corporations responsible for major devastation of the earth will be working side-by-side with environmental activists trying to stop that very devastation.

The Earth Day Oregon 1990 Committee is no exception in this struggle. After several months of often heated and passionate debate, they recently decided that "primary resource extractors" (timber companies, mining, utilities, etc.) can sponsor the local festivities if they can prove that their resource extraction is environmentally responsible.

The committee also decided that sponsors will not have to agree with the goals or principles of Earth Day, as some had wanted, but will have to make "a lasting commitment to the environment."

Betinna Von Hagen, vice president at First Interstate Bank working as an Earth Day fundraiser, voiced her concern that forcing corporations to meet any kind of environmental criteria would make fundraising impossible.

"It's not which criteria we raise. . . it's the fact we raise any roadblocks" that turn away corporate donors, Von Hagen warned. "If we introduce anything, the process will collapse."

Fred Meyer is proof of Von Hagen's concern about corporate attitudes. The company had initially committed to a \$25,000 sponsorship for Earth Day, but after criticism of its environmental and political responsibility at an Earth Day meeting, the company decided to cancel its support.

(Earth Day executive director Janelle Schmidt emphasizes that Von Hagen represents herself, and not First Interstate, on the Earth Day Committee, although Schmidt does admit she meets with bank officials concerning the project.)

Many on the Earth Day Committee are concerned about the national media attention that will likely be focused specifically on Portland, due to its progressive environmental image.

Dick Roy, Earth Day Steering Committee member and attorney at Stoel, Rives, voiced this concern at a recent meeting:

"We want to get as many people as possible demonstrating for the earth at one place at one time. . . for the cameras. Remember the Vietnam war demonstrations. . . . It was the crowds that made the difference."

This pressure to turn out large numbers led, in the initial phases of Earth Day planning, to a more traditional approach to soliciting money from corporations that might not pass a serious environmental litmus test.

A list obtained by the Portland Free Press includes forty corporations approached by the Earth Day Committee late last year.

Although current committee members and staff deny that the list was put together strictly for fundraising purposes, the tops of the columns of the checklist are labeled: Phoned; Sent Endorser Ad Information; Sent Sponsorship Package; Personal Appointment; and Donation to Date.

Most of these boxes were checked for the forty firms.

On this list are names such as Burger King, Tektronix, Key Bank, U.S. Bank, Pacific Power & Light, Northwest Natural Gas, Portland General Electric, Honeywell, and First Interstate. The donations column is illegible, but it can be determined that Tektronix, a major polluter in the Portland area, gave a verbal commitment to donate \$500.

The Earth Day Committee claims to not be approaching these corporations now that they understand the feelings of the community at large.

Portland General Electric, the owner of the area's nuclear power plant, is by far the most controversial potential donor to Earth Day Oregon.

Earth Day will come at a time when an initiative to close down PGE's Trojan Nuclear Power Plant will be on the ballot. This makes their presence on the Earth Day Coordinating Com-



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mittee and participation in Earth Day events extremely sensitive.

Ron Klein, PGE employee, has been on the committee since its inception. A representative of Fred Meyer was also on the committee, until her resignation in February.

PGE originally offered free use of the area around its World Trade Center for the Earth Fair, the major event of the committee. Since the debate over corporate sponsorship and dirty money, PGE has withdrawn that offer and will charge the group for use of the space.

While PGE was one of three companies that the Earth Day Corporate Sponsorship Committee (dubbed the "Dirty Money" committee) recommended be excluded from sponsorship, the Coordinating Committee did not adopt that rule.

Janelle Schmidt, executive director of Earth Day Oregon, said that as of February 22, PGE would not participate in Earth Day either as a sponsor, and endorser, or participant at the fair.

Endorsers are any company that paid \$500 and agreed to have its name printed next to the Earth Day principles on a full page Oregonian ad that ran in March.

Any company can also have a booth at the fair, as long as it addresses the theme of "working towards a sustainable future."

Schmidt said that, if they wanted to, Amoco Oil pushing its plastics recycling would probably be permitted at the fair.

"We'll also have the other booth next door, which says this doesn't work. People will have to weigh these things," added John Jennings, a member of the Steering Committee.

Another point of contention was the definition of the "unrecognized donor." It was decided that contributions of a thousand dollars or more would be reviewed by the steering committee for appropriate action. This was designed to avoid the situation of a company, such as one responsible for a superfund site, giving an unrecognized contribution and then disclosing to the public that they gave it. Under the provision, however, a company can give \$999, and the money must be accepted.

Brian Hoop, Earth Day Campus Coordinator at the University of Oregon in Eugene said, "I'm glad (corporate sponsorship) has come up as an issue. The traditional grassroots movement can't fool itself anymore. . . the environmental movement of the nineties is how well you can sell the environment. The corporate sponsored Earth Day is a sign of that new interest — the grassroots environmental groups are rebelling against it, but they're not taking it seriously. They're wishing it would go away. Corporate America has every intention of using Earth Day to maximize their profits. They know the ecological message will sell their products. . . they have no serious interest in changing policies and addressing issues."

Mike Roselle, co-founder of Earth First! and a member of the Earth Day 1990 National Board, said that the problem with Earth Day is "not so much where they're getting the money, but the fact that they're not really going to be confronting any of the serious problems we're facing. . . . I'm really afraid of Earth Day becoming like Labor Day. Nobody talks about Bill Haywood. Nobody talks about the automotive strike. The Pullman strike. Great events that really shaped the labor movement. We just have fried chicken, wave some flags and hear a few speeches from politicians. We can't afford to let this happen to Earth Day. Unless the grassroots people demonstrate their outrage. . . it will be like 'Hands Across America.' All everybody got was a t-shirt with a Coca-Cola logo on it. I don't think the Earth Day Committee is doing anything to insure that doesn't happen."

Andrew Seltser is editor of the Portland Free Press, from which this article has been reprinted.

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