

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A CHALLENGE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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REFERENCE: *Proceedings of the 1995 Georgia Water Resources Conference*, held April 11 and 12, 1995, at The University of Georgia, Kathryn J. Hatcher, Editor, Carl Vinson Institute of Government, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

Abstract. The term "sustainable development" is usually credited to the 1987 report of the World Commission On Environment And Development, entitled *Our Common Future*. To achieve the changes in human actions judged necessary to restore and preserve the planet's environment, the Commission recommended the development of a United Nations' program on sustainable development. The discussions and recommendations concerning this program provided the impetus for the United Nations' Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June, 1992. Debate at this conference focused on, among other things, world environmental and development issues related to climate change and sustainability. Since this conference, many nations have pursued the concept of sustainable development through entities appointed to formulate a process to define a sustainable future. In the U.S., this approach has taken the form of the President's Council on Sustainable Development, created in 1992 by President Clinton.

Since 1988, pursuant to a bilateral agreement between the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Environment Canada, the United States and Canada have jointly sponsored a series of five symposia on the implications of climate change. These meetings have focused on regions of mutual interest such as the Great Lakes, Great Plains, and the Pacific Northwest. This series continues in May, 1995, with a much broader focus: sustainable development in the context of global environmental change. The latest symposium, *Planning for a Sustainable Future: The Case of the North American Great Plains*, will emphasize a region that represents a critical environmental zone, where the impacts of climate change are likely to be more severe and to materialize more rapidly than in less fragile ecosystems.

This symposium, the rationale for it, its planning, implementation and intended results, will be discussed as a model process by which a region can begin defining its sustainable future.

INTRODUCTION

In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development, commonly referred to as the Brundtland Commission, published its seminal work, *Our Common*

Future. Much of the Commission's report focused on issues of population, food security, loss of species and genetic resources, energy, industry, and human settlements -- realizing that these issues are interconnected and must be addressed as part of a global strategy. To achieve the recommendations considered necessary to preserve and restore the environment of our planet, the Commission recommended the development of a United Nations' program on sustainable development. The discussions and recommendations that emanated from the Commission provided the central impetus for the organization of the United Nations' Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June, 1992. At this conference, debate focused on significant world environmental and development issues such as climate change, biodiversity, desertification, and sustainability. Agenda 21 emerged from this conference as a roadmap for an environmentally sustainable future.

The term "sustainable development" originated with the Brundtland Commission report. It was defined by the Commission as "... development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Although there is considerable disagreement within the scientific and policy communities on the precise meaning of the term, it is widely accepted because it best incorporates the objectives of economic growth and environmental protection.

In the post-UNCED period, many national governments have pursued the concept of sustainable development through creation of national-level committees or task forces charged with the formulation of a process through which a sustainable future could be defined for different regions and sectors. In the United States, this process has taken the form of the President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD), created by President Clinton in 1992.

THE MODEL

Since 1988, through a bilateral agreement between the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Environment Canada, the United States and Canada have jointly sponsored a series of five major symposia on the implications of climate change. These symposia have focused

on regions of mutual interest (e.g., the Great Lakes, the Great Plains, and the forests of the Pacific Northwest). This series of jointly sponsored meetings continues in May, 1995, but with a much broader focus: sustainable development in the context of global environmental change. The latest symposium, *Planning for a Sustainable Future: The Case of the North American Great Plains*, will emphasize a region that represents a critical environmental zone, where the impacts of climate change are likely to be more severe and to materialize more rapidly than in environmentally less fragile ecosystems. This symposium will be an opportunity for those involved in sustainable development to exchange ideas, ranging from broad policy-level perspectives to highly specific, practical ways of conserving resources and minimizing environmental impacts. Sustainable development issues will be discussed in a regional context with national and international overtones. The symposium format will include plenary presentations, working group discussions, and a demonstration session aimed at showcasing the lessons learned from a wide variety of related projects.

There are many stakeholders in the future of the North American Great Plains. Incorporating the divergent views of individuals, organizations, and agencies is a difficult but essential element in the process of divining and creating a sustainable future for the region. The symposium will help open a formal dialog between sustainability experts, top-level policy makers, and these stakeholders. Conferees will be asked to work together to develop recommendations for future action and policy-relevant research that will lead the region toward a sustainable future. Ideally, long-term solutions should be viable environmentally, economically, and socially.

Although defining a sustainable future for the region is considered to be a long-term process, the meeting's planning committee will prepare a plan of action immediately following the meeting that will be communicated to the President's Council on Sustainable Development and to the government of Canada's Sustainable Development Agenda. In the U.S., the PCSD's report is to be submitted to President Clinton in the summer of 1995.

THE INTENT

This presentation will focus on the rationale underlying the organization of the Great Plains symposium and its principal goals. Defining a "sustainable future" for the region is obviously a key goal and formidable challenge. Achieving this goal is likely to require continuation of discussion and work for months or years following the meeting. This on-going process will likely include many different kinds and levels of activities, including working groups and workshops, to further explore issues identified during the symposium.

A second goal of this symposium is to define a process through which a sustainable future can be developed. Conference organizers felt strongly from the outset that the process

defined by this symposium should be transferrable, with appropriate modifications, to other regions or nations facing a similar challenge.

Should Georgia or the southeastern United States pursue the creation of a sustainable development plan? If so, what should be the process by which that plan is formulated? Will the climate of the region change? If so, how will this change affect regional hydrology, water and related resource availability, and the economic and social viability of the region? Is the process adopted for and by the North American Great Plains symposium transferrable to the Southeast? What types of modifications should be incorporated? Who are the primary stakeholders in the Southeast that should be invited to the table to develop a regionally appropriate process?

It is the aspiration of this paper to stimulate discussion on this issue of critical regional importance.