

Lobbying for Clean Air
Robin Kristufek, RN, PHN
Physicians for Social Responsibility/Sacramento

How fortunate I was to be able to represent Sacramento PSR at the “Clean Air Ambassador” lobbying event organized by Earthjustice in Washington, D.C. this May 2013! A whirlwind of meetings inspiring people working at the grass roots level to clean the air in their communities, and then meeting with Congresspeople, Senators, EPA, and White House staff; it was exciting, fast-paced, fulfilling, and stimulating. Over 115 people arrived in D.C. from all 50 states and Puerto Rico to participate in the event, from these diverse groups: American Nurses Association, Earthjustice, the Hip Hop Caucus, Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, the NAACP, the National Council of Churches, the National Latino Coalition on Climate Change, and of course us, Physicians for Social Responsibility. It was a wonderful mix of interesting, brave, and creative people who are working tirelessly to improve the air in their communities. There were six of us from California – myself and five others from the two Latino organizations and the Hip Hop Caucus. The additional PSR participants from other states were:

Marybeth Dunn - PSR Florida	Paul Perkins - PSR Maine
Cindy Parker - PSR Maryland	Georgia Milan – PSR Montana
Chandran Achutan – PSR Nebraska	Alan Lockwood – PSR Buffalo New York
Laurel Linden – PSR New Mexico	Susan Frances Katz – PSR Oregon
Katharina Hathaway - PSR Texas	Steven Gilbert – PSR Washington
Tracey Bier - PSR Washington	

So what did this lobbying event consist of?

First we went through several hours of “training”, preparing us for our large and small group meetings with the EPA, White House staff, and our Congresspeople and Senators that Earthjustice had completely arranged for us. Trainings consisted of inspirational speeches by fiery community activists, videos that demonstrated an effective lobbying experience versus an ineffective one, and nuts and bolts about the five issues that Earth Justice wanted us to ask for at our meetings. The issues were:

- Need to finalize standards for CO2 emissions from coal-fired power plants
- Need to tighten the standard for allowable levels of ozone from 75 ppb to 60 ppb
- Need to fully implement the new standard for small particulate matter in our air that the EPA approved in December (called PM 2.5)
- Need to finalize cleaner gasoline and tailpipe emission standards
- Need to develop coal ash regulations (this is the toxic waste left over after coal is burned in power plants, the disposal of which is not currently regulated at all!) (Dr. Steven Gilbert, a PSR representative from Washington presented the facts about coal ash and did an excellent job by the way).

We were asked to speak to these five issues at the meetings they had set up for us, while interweaving our own personal stories into the discussion. It was stressed many times during the trainings that humans remember, and are deeply affected by, emotional stories more than we remember or are affected by facts and figures. So, it became clear that our main purpose really was to provide emotional stories to the D.C. officials, so that they might be moved to implement the five specific things we were to ask for.

Our first meeting was a whole-group meeting with several EPA officials plus Nancy Sutley, the Chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality (the White House website says “In her role as Chair, she serves as the principal environmental policy adviser to the President.”). (If you look on the Earthjustice website and see a large group photo of the “50 States” group, you’ll see the photo that was taken in front of the EPA building just before we had this whole-group meeting). After each of the officials did a presentation about what they were doing on clean air issues, there was Q and A where we could ask questions of them. We were supposed to ask specific questions only regarding the five specific issues outlined above. However, some of us went off script and asked or commented about other issues: “What are you doing to stop fracking? What about the Keystone Pipeline? What about the coming extinction of our species if we don’t make drastic changes very soon? These small things that you are doing are simply not enough. You must do much more than what you are proposing if we are to survive.” We were told by Earthjustice people after this meeting that we were not to bring these issues up again, however; that Earthjustice brought us here to address the five specific issues and we need to focus solely on those for maximum effectiveness of our meetings.

The next day, we met with our elected officials. Earthjustice had incredibly arranged over 200 meetings with Senators and Congresspeople, making for a very busy day! Because most of us Ambassadors were unfamiliar with the House and Senate office buildings and the Capitol, each small group had a local D.C. activist with us who knew the buildings so could bring us to each appointment smoothly. I was grouped with two young Latino men. One is an “ANA” nurse from Fresno and the other, a Latino Labor Council activist from Woodland. They both had inspiring stories to tell about family members who work long hours in horrible air in the agricultural fields, many family members hospitalized with asthma, etc. Our guide for the day was an Earthjustice attorney who seemed to know the office buildings and Capitol very well as he had clearly done a lot of lobbying.

Our little group of three met with seven elected officials (or their staffers):

- Staffer for Eric Swalwell, 15th district by San Ramon, in hallway
- Staffer for Doris Matsui, in waiting room
- John Garamendi himself, in hallway outside of Ag Committee meeting room
- Staffer for Ami Bera, in waiting room
- Staffer for Barbara Lee, in hallway
- Jim Costa himself, 16th district, Fresno/Madera, (briefly, just for photos) then more with his staffer in waiting room
- Barbara Boxer herself, in hallway outside of Senate floor in Capitol

So as you can see, we didn’t meet any official or their staffer in their offices. It was clear that the offices were all in use; meetings were taking place in those offices with people much more important than us!

The actual elected officials we met with at any length, John Garamendi and Barbara Boxer, were not nearly as attentive as the staffers we met with. Staffers took notes and asked questions and seemed to listen to what we had to say. The elected were rushed.

John Garamendi did listen some but also glossed over our questions and wanted to talk about the great things he’s done. For instance, when I asked what he was doing about improving public transportation and he said “Sacramento has great public transportation, we’ve put a lot of money into Sacramento’s system and it’s wonderful”. I said I begged to differ and he waved his arms

and changed the subject. He talked a lot about how much he agrees with us and of course he is doing everything possible to clean the air. We didn't have much time with him because he was in a rush and wanted to take a photo. When asked what we can do to help him in our mutual quest, he said the main thing is to put pressure on the representatives who vote against clean air, to change them.

Barbara Boxer didn't listen at all. Most of our five minutes with her was taken up with the Senator talking about how of course she totally agrees with us, of course we are on the same side, because she is working hard to do everything possible to clean our environment and the trouble is the money in politics. She said we will prevail however, "soon we will have all electric cars and then we will have totally clean air". I said well it depends on how we make the electricity, if it's made by fossil-fueled power plants then electric cars are no good at all, and she said, "oh we wouldn't do that, don't worry" and continued talking all about how much we are both in the same camp. We had no chance to "tell our stories" at all. So I suppose the point of meeting with her was just to let her know we are out there in general, to remind her that there are more than just billionaires in California, there are some regular people.

Boxer and Garamendi both extolled California's high air quality standards as a role model for the nation. Neither were willing to acknowledge the fact that California's air quality standards are obviously not nearly enough; neither responded when shown the American Lung Association's 2013 "Most Polluted Cities" report where California shamefully holds seven of the top ten slots for ozone, and eight of the top ten slots for annual particle pollution.

Finally, it was very good to connect with some of the other PSR representatives, at a dinner graciously arranged by Barb Gottlieb, PSR Director of Environment & Health. The consensus seemed to be that the five "asking points" Earthjustice gave us are not enough; that we must ask for and achieve much more than those incremental changes. Deeper, systemic change may be necessary. There was much discussion about the fact that PSR was very influential 50 years ago in the fight to limit nuclear testing; and how can we again be leaders to bring about the far-reaching environmental changes currently needed?

In the end: I came away from the Earthjustice Clean Air Ambassador Event feeling quite inspired by the community activists, such as those living next to oil refineries or toxic coal ash dumps who are creatively finding solutions who are working so hard to bring positive change. There are some very brave activists in our country who are facing our problems head on. And I also came away quite disillusioned by our elected officials who are out of touch with the urgency and reality of our situation. It's clear to me that our elected officials are simply not willing to do what must be done to save millions of species including our own, from extinction: the task of cutting yearly greenhouse gas output by 80%. Not only are our elected officials not willing to cut yearly greenhouse gas output, they are promoting policies that actually will increase yearly greenhouse gas output: Bailing out the auto industry; increasing military presence in the world; building more roads for cars rather than more bike lanes and mass transit systems; opening up more land than any other administration has ever done to mining and drilling; likely approving the Keystone pipeline, etc. etc. Clearly we are in a dire situation and we cannot depend on anyone in Washington DC to lead us where we need to go, if we are to ever have great great great grandchildren. So what ARE we going to do, to ensure the survival of our species another 100,000 years.