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Maine's Public Interest Groups: The Natural Resources Council of Maine

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News and Commentary

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The Natural Resources Council of Maine

Maine Policy Review

Few interest groups are more influential in the halls of the State House than the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM). Whether or not legislators and state department heads support the NRCM's efforts on specific issues, they are cognizant of the Council's high visibility and its track record of successful public policy initiatives.

"To protect, conserve, and restore Maine's environment, and to ensure the wise use of its resources for now and future generations," is the Council's central charge, according to its mission statement. That charge is manifested in the NRCM's work on issues related to the quality of Maine's air, land, and water. For example, the Council worked successfully to block a turnpike widening project in 1991 through a voter initiative and, at the same time, persuaded voters to endorse the development of a new state transportation policy. As a result, they were integrally involved in the collaborative process that developed rules for a new state transportation policy. The new policy encourages such activities as car pooling, using railways or buses, walking, or riding a bicycle. The Council also supported legislation that requires emission testing of automobiles and repairs for vehicles causing the most pollution.

The Council has been involved in other air quality issues, including the AES coal-fired power plant proposed for Bucksport, which was denied, and the attempt by the paper and utility industries to let Maine withdraw from a regional effort to control ozone pollution. The Council has also pushed for tougher standards on sulfur pollutants released by Maine's paper industry.

In 1991, the Council's efforts in protecting the lands of Maine produced a conservation plan for Maine's North Woods. The plan would designate unorganized territories of Maine as off-limits to residential development and land speculation. The Council hopes that through its work with the public, legislators, landowners and policy makers that a policy will be designed to insure the sustainability of the North Woods.

The Council is also working with communities to develop comprehensive plans to protect natural resources and open space by directing new development to where it is most suitable. For example, the Council and the town of Wilton worked together to develop a two-tiered approach for managing the potential sprawl associated with the extension of sewer lines to the town's boundary with Farmington. On a related topic, the Council is researching the transfer of development rights and how the concept can be applied in Maine. The Council has also worked on reducing Maine's solid waste problems. The Council proposed guidelines for companies that

claim their products are recycled and serves as a monitor for a voluntary industry-sponsored program aimed at reducing packaging waste at the source.

Recent water issues undertaken include lobbying for toxic testing of waste water from industrial, commercial and municipal treatment facilities, and the testing of lakes, rivers and coastal waters (including sediment and aquatic life) for toxic chemicals. The Council has entered into a pollution prevention collaboration with the Maine Metal Products Association to identify ways to reduce toxins in their production. Other water projects included the Council's strong commitment to stopping the contamination of Maine's rivers with dioxin from kraft pulp mills and the legal and education work done to restore the Kennebec River and its fisheries by removing the Edwards Dam.

Composed of a Board of Directors and a staff of 23 employees, the Council derives most of its financial support (approximately two-thirds) from membership donations. The remaining support comes from foundation grants and private contributors. The annual budget for fiscal year 1992 was \$1,110,488. Approximately 70 percent of the budget was dedicated to the various programs of the Council. The remaining 30 percent was divided between development and management.

The Council, directed by Everett B. "Brownie" Carson, spends the majority of its time as advocates for the various natural resource issues. This includes involvement in the legislative process, in rule making at the regulatory level, as members of legislative advisory committees and by providing education programs to the general public. The Board, which establishes the Council's agenda, is presided over by Lawrence Horwitz (Marketing Consultant, Kennebunkport). The Council is an affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation.

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