

## OPINION

# 'Sustainable development'

BY STEVE CHARNOVITZ

Several weeks ago, a high-level, bipartisan council appointed by President Clinton submitted a report on how to improve the linkage between the economy and the environment. With the presidential primaries in full swing, the new report sank quickly from public view. That outcome was unfortunate since the report contains many useful ideas.

The blue-ribbon panel, known as the President's Council on Sustainable Development, contained 25 members from business, labor, environmental groups, the federal government and state and regional government. The business executives included the chairmen or chief executives (or retired chief executives) from Ciba Geigy, Pacific Gas and Electric, Chevron, Georgia-Pacific, Enron and Browning-Ferris Industries. Four Cabinet secretaries, including the late secretary of commerce, served on the panel.

When he created the council in June 1993, Mr. Clinton asked it to recommend "a national sustainable development action strategy that will foster economic vitality." The council made several recommendations.

To start with, the council endorses "sustainable development," which requires a "recognition that the pursuit of one set of goals affects others and that we must pursue policies that integrate economic, environmental and social goals." In an implicit critique of economic analysis, the council suggests that policy-makers are too focused on making trade-offs between competing objectives rather than trying to reconcile them. The report urges broader participation in policy-making as one way of improving decisions and "counteracting the corrosive trends of cynicism and civic disengagement."

On federal environmental regulation, the council sees a lot of room for improvement. It endorses regulatory strategies that use market forces, provide greater flexibility and rely more

on voluntary compliance. (The word "voluntary" appears 45 times in the 186-page report.)

The council supports the idea of charging commercial beneficiaries of public resources the "full cost" of their depletion or use. It also supports the adoption of a tradeable quota system for fishermen. In one of its most interesting conclusions, the council finds that flexible "custom-tailored" environmental management may cost the government more than the one-size fits all variety. This presents a challenge to those politicians who perennially promise to "do more with less."

Transportation was also addressed. The report endorses electronic road charges and urges Congress to encourage this. The panel also wants Congress to equalize the tax preferences relating to fringe benefits for transit (\$60 a month) and parking (\$160 a month). More generally, it recommends that government shift federal transportation spending toward transit and highway maintenance and away from the construction of new highways or beltways.

The report's most contentious issue may be population policy. The council recommends that the United States move to a "stabilization" of its population. Yet the report offers no evidence for the view that stable population levels are necessary for sustainable development. The panel also ducks the issue of the appropriate level of immigration. It states only that we should reduce "illegal" immigration.

The council devotes some attention to the international dimension of sustainable development. First, it believes American business and government should cooperate to increase U.S. exports of environmental technologies. Second, U.S. trade negotiators should encourage other countries to "raise their environmental and labor standards in fostering trade and in attracting investment." Third, the United States should increase its international assis-

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"One day, son - all this will be yours!"

tance for sustainable development. Fourth, the federal government should promote the participation of nongovernmental organizations and private industry in international agreements.

While the council takes a cosmopolitan approach to some issues, on others it seems parochial. The report endorses exports, but does not state that free-trade promotes sustainable development. The report barely mentions the U.N. Environment Program, and says nothing about the work of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development or the environmental commission of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Are these institutions important to the United States, and if so, why don't we pay more attention to them?

Overall, the report is constructive and worth reading. But in many areas, it is overrun with recommendations too

vague to be usable. For example, the report urges the federal government to "promote international cooperation on scientific research related to sustainability," but does not distinguish this from current policy.

It is unclear what impact the council's report will have on policy. The administration said little about it. No congressional committee has held a hearing on it. Indeed, the breadth of the council's work makes it broader than the jurisdiction of any one committee. Just before the Easter recess, House Speaker Newt Gingrich named a 78-member Task Force on the Environment. The task force might start by holding hearings on the council's forward-looking report.

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