

Earth Day founder remains active

Small-scale solutions hearten Camas native, but global problems worrisome

By ERIN MIDDLEWOOD

Columbian staff writer

Thirty-six years ago, Camas native and Clark College graduate Denis Hayes organized the first Earth Day.

Hayes, now president of the Seattle-based Bullitt Foundation, talked with *The Columbian* this week as he prepared to travel to Amsterdam and Kiev, Ukraine, for Earth Day celebrations.

His decades of work to improve the environment include serving as the first head of the National Renewable Energy Laboratory during the Carter administration. *Time* magazine named him a "Hero of the Planet" in 1999.

He's garnered headlines lately as co-chairman of Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels' Green Ribbon Commission on Climate Protection. Nickels has persuaded 223 other mayors (including Vancouver Mayor Royce Pollard) to sign on to reduce greenhouse gas

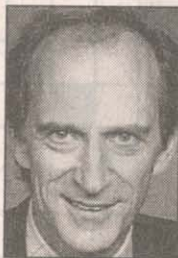
emissions as outlined in the Kyoto Protocol.

Is the environment better or worse off than it was 36 years ago for the first Earth Day?

Well, it's both. On many local, regional, state, even some national issues, we are in better shape now than we were in 1970.

The air pollution from automobiles and power plants that used to make urban air almost unbreathable has in large measure been cleaned up. The Great Lakes, which were dying, rivers that were catching on fire — these huge environmental insults have been addressed.

We're doing less well on the big



Denis Hayes

Inspired to act by Camas paper mill

global issues. We continue to pour out far more greenhouse gases now than we did in 1970. The world's population is bigger than it was in 1970. There are far more species endangered. ... So it really is a mixture.

You've been working on global warming. Would you call it the top environmental problem?

I've never been really big on the David Letterman approach to environmental issues. But it clearly is a critically important issue, and one that has to be solved, and it's the one that's most timely. ... This is now the issue that has been on the cover of many of the major newsweeklies, National Geographic and Rolling Stone and Vanity Fair.

Unfortunately, although we have the public now increasingly ready to move, we don't have any receptiv-

Hayes:

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ity inside the Beltway. ... It is just a frustration at other levels of government that our federal government has been an opponent, actually — not just indifferent but an active opponent — to global efforts to try to become aggressive on this issue.

Is global warming a problem perpetrated by corporations or individuals?

The greatest amount of emissions of carbon dioxide per unit of energy is coal combustion for electricity, or coal combustion for industrial processes.

Driving is big just because Americans do so much more of it, and in so much larger vehicles than anyone else in the world. In terms of international culpability, it's the place where we are the most to blame. We have 5 percent of the world's population and we consume 43 percent of the world's gasoline.

The thing that makes it difficult to address climate change is that there is a carbon cycle. ... We're taking all these fuels that were pulled out of the atmosphere millions of years ago as plants were growing, went under great geological pressures for long periods of time and were permanently sequestered — as coal, or as oil or as methane. Now we're bringing them up and adding

them back to the atmosphere, and we're going to be warming up the planet to approach conditions that existed when those gases were in the atmosphere to begin with, and dinosaurs were roaming northern Canada.

Are you working on a book?

I'm working on a book dealing with renewable energy. We're at a point now where we need to be investing just as much as we possibly can in making everything more efficient. ... Certainly that starts with automobiles, but it continues through houses and appliances, industry, jet travel and what have you. But beyond that, we also need to make a transition away from dependence on fossil fuels.

How did growing up in Camas influence your trajectory?

Camas then was a relatively remote place. It was not yet a suburb of Portland with the huge amount of commuter traffic that there is now. It was surrounded by rich forests, and most everybody who grew up there, whether or not they ever formally became environmentalists, fell in love with hiking and camping and fishing — it was just integral to the culture.

Nestled in the middle of that was a paper mill that operated with essentially no pollution controls, pouring out gigantic plumes of sulfur dioxide and hydrogen sulfide. Depending on which direction the wind blew, you found yourself gag-

ging as these precursors to acids met with moisture in your trachea and entered into your lungs. I probably still have lung problems from growing up there.

Occasionally, you'd go down to the river and you'd see literally hundreds and hundreds of fish belly up in the water. ... It was this huge split between a part of your life where you could see a natural world that operated according to the laws of nature and produced no pollution and was rich and vibrant — and this other place where we seemed to be trying to ignore the laws of nature that were producing these horrifying kinds of consequences.

What do you make of Clark County as someone who grew up here?

It seems to be well on its way to becoming Los Angeles. Oregon embraced a series of urban growth boundaries and other measures to try to protect open spaces and farm lands, and the pressures that were building up in Portland were met by the officials in Clark County with what seems to be more or less a come-and-get-it attitude.

This was the great pressure release valve for Portland. It's having some sad consequences. We have huge developments down there on septic systems that ought to have sewer lines. When they overflow, it's just tragic. It's just uncontrolled growth.

Can you make the connection between what's happening in Clark County and global warming?

People are building 4,000-, 5,000-, 6,000-square-foot houses for two, three, four people, so you're spending all that energy heating all of that space, most of which is completely unoccupied for most of the time. In order to get a place that's cheap enough that you can build that big of house, you're moving to remote areas and struggling with massive traffic jams and stop-and-go traffic, which is by far the most energy inefficient way to drive — stop-and-go traffic all the way to downtown Portland. That's producing a gigantic contribution to the climate change.