



# ENERGY NEWS

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## Local Solutions — The Long Road Begins

by Robert Farmer, © 2000

Attendees of the *Blueprint for Cooling Down Florida Conference*, organized by the Alliance for Florida's Future and the Natural Resources Defense Council in St. Petersburg on February 17th, must have been struck by the sheer scope of the task facing us if we ever hope to get a handle on the global warming problem.

Quickly convened, lending urgency to the need for starting to work on solutions, this conference featured a jam-packed schedule of presentations. An impressive roster of national and regional speakers covered every insight and nuance that Floridians can leverage against this pernicious threat. All, sadly, with meager financial support to combat global warming from the state or federal governments.

So many conferences focus on climate change impacts and adaptation (building seawalls, for instance) but not on the solutions necessary to mitigate the greenhouse threat. The reason for this lies in the gagging of EPA by Congress, banned from even talking about the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol prior to its ratification by the US Senate. Congress seems to be saying, "We the people, as represented by the Senate, will decide whether there's cause for concern and, for the imaginable future, we have decided there isn't."

But the environmental community and

these Floridians are not prepared to wait while Congress fiddles. That set the tone for this fast-paced, information-intensive conference.

Ross Gelbspan, keynote speaker, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author of *The Heat Is On*, set the pace with a breathless and stark litany of the dangers already facing humanity: increased storm frequency and severity; the spread of infectious diseases and crop-destroying insects; rising sea levels; and so on, all the way out to political and social unrest. The CIA is even studying the effects of climate change related to political disruptions. And the head of The Reinsurance Association of America (the folks who back our insurance companies) said, "we must deal with global warming, otherwise it will bankrupt the industry." Gelbspan posits that hardest hit will be areas where impoverished humans struggle to feed themselves. Global warming will make it impossible to survive as the food crops such as rice that now sustain them suffer dramatic declines in production, or migrate away with warmer temperatures. The impacts of global warming pose a real threat to democracy itself, he warns.

The morning's perspectives and impacts sessions seemed almost austere compared to the quickening pace of the afternoon's solutions sessions. But this had more to do with the content of the presentations than anything else. This

was information that the audience had largely not heard before; it had a Florida flavor; the speakers were talking about our hometowns; and there wasn't enough time to take even one question from the audience. There was enough energy and enthusiasm here for two or even three days.

The audience of over 100 participants, comprised largely of environmental activists, with substantial government representation, and to a lesser extent, business and academic interests, heard presentations on a wide range of solutions and barriers. Topics covered the *Million Solar Roofs Initiative*, electricity generation issues, greening the utilities, Miami-Dade's *Urban CO2 Reduction Program*, empowering the consumer, hydrogen transportation, Clean Cities Coalitions, Broward County's hybrid electric vehicles, location efficient mortgages, mass transit in Florida and the failure of light-rail in Orlando.

Attendees gained an insight on what's being done today and the barriers we face. On one hand it seemed too much: Where on Earth do we go from here? On the other it was *Local Solutions 101—The Long Road Ahead*. We learned that public education is critical so we can all begin the process of dealing with the intricacies of implementing successful global warming solutions.

One example is the issue of restructur-

## Local Solutions — The Long Road Begins (continued)

ing in the electric power industry. Florida ranks #50 on the Energy Information Administration's list of states moving toward deregulation of their electric utilities. But that doesn't mean it's not going to happen in Florida, and the federal government will ultimately ensure that it does. Florida's utilities are certainly preparing for when the time comes. It is imperative the public be equally prepared, and that takes education.

Restructuring in Florida presents an opportunity to negotiate with our utilities for a future that includes, among other public services, a renewable portfolio standard and energy efficiency measures which could go a long way to addressing both global warming and long-term energy security concerns. The Tallahassee-based public interest law firm, Legal Environmental Assistance Foundation (LEAF), has drafted model legislation along these lines in preparation for deregulation. At the federal level, loopholes in *The Clean Air Act* that allow for continuing use of dirty power plants must be closed. But these measures can only happen if Florida's people are prepared and in position to make themselves heard as the restructuring debate emerges. Our window of opportunity won't be there for long but when it does appear we must move swiftly and assuredly to negotiate for a future we all want.

Conferences such as these, structured toward engaging the audience with the invited experts, serve to begin the process of bringing informed consumers to the fore. They also serve to empower people to initiate action plans at the local level—much as the United Nations' *Agenda 21* program has inspired sustainable development activities in Europe and the rest of the world. There, global warming action plans are but one aspect of planning for sustainable development and protection of the environment.

This conference was the beginning

of a process, and it was enthusiastically received. Until Congress ratifies the Kyoto Protocol, which might be never, we can thank the environmental community in the US for leading the way. •



Robert Farmer is an energy planning engineer and energy policy specialist. A comprehensive resource on technologies, issues, and policies, he offers clients strategies, briefings, and presentations on planning a sustainable energy future.

His technical expertise includes large scale to small scale power generation, combined heat and power (CHP), marine and surface transportation, and alternative fuel applications.

A Florida resident since 1984, Robert was a member of the Energy Advisory Committee of Governor Chiles' Commission for a Sustainable South Florida.

He is a Regional member and Market Development Chair of the Gold Coast Clean Cities Coalition (a U.S. Department of Energy program), and a member of the Southeast Air Coalition for Outreach (SEACO, an initiative of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection).

He is a member of the international Association of Energy Engineers (AEE) and since 1992 has served on the Board of the Southeast Florida Society of Energy Professionals, the local AEE chapter. He is a member of the Sound Science Initiative of the Union of Concerned Scientists, and a member of the United States Association for Energy Economics (USAEE).

He is also a member of the Board of Directors of the Tallahassee-based law firm, Legal Environmental Assistance Foundation, Inc. (LEAF), and of Third Planet, a Fort Lauderdale-based public charity.

He graduated as a Planning Engineer with Bristol-Siddeley Engines/Rolls Royce Gas Turbines Ltd. in the United Kingdom and has over 30 years engineering, sales and service management experience in the engine power industry in North America.

robertfarmer@conceptcommuniques.com  
CONCEPT COMMUNIQUE'S INC.  
5200 N Federal Hwy Ste 2  
Fort Lauderdale FL 33308  
(954) 493-8127

[www.conceptcommuniques.com](http://www.conceptcommuniques.com)