

Inside This Issue:

Introduction
Page 1

Guest Speakers
Page 2

UF Economist Posits:
Will Florida be
prepared for 2030?
Page 3

Consumer Fertilizer
Task Force
Page 3

Field Trip:
State Capitol
Page 4

Stakeholder Panel
Page 5

Session Summary
Page 6



Introduction: Legislation, Leadership, and Listening

For its second session, NRLI met at the Killlearn Country Club in Tallahassee, Florida. The focus of the session was the Florida Legislature and the process by which complex environmental issues are presented and considered and resolved (or not) in the State Capital.

The program brought forward numerous legislative leaders, state agency officials, and lobbyists to discuss their experiences in handling several controversial environmental issues.

The Fellows were additionally challenged to focus less on the interesting substantive issues and more on the leadership skills employed to produce effective results, particularly collaborative leadership techniques,

active listening, and successful stakeholder panel creation.

On Friday, the team and Fellows wore matching green shirts having a prominent NRLI logo in order to distinguish the group during a day-long visit to the Capitol. The disorienting maze of hallways and stairs from the Capitol to the Knott Building offered a metaphor for the legislative process.

A panel consisting of an environmental advocate, a State Senator, and senior staff from two state agencies discussed challenges in protecting Florida's natural resources, including agriculture. One challenge mentioned included the balance between passing bills and lobbying. ■

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Guest Speakers for Session II

Senator Mike Bennett

The session began with a presentation by Sen. Mike Bennett of Bradenton, Florida. While in the state legislature, he has been involved in numerous environmental issues, including alternative energy programs, offshore oil drilling, seagrass protection, and sustainability.

Bennett's talk focused on the principles of leadership that he relies on to tackle difficult and controversial issues. His first precept is to remember that he is a public servant.

According to Bennett, many problems faced by government officials can be resolved if they take ownership of a problem and are responsive to the calls for help. For this reason, he advocates an open door policy, always promptly returning phone calls and, most importantly, letting people know you care about their issue. One of the ways to make government officials more responsive includes eliminating the duplication that occurs among different agencies. Obtaining assistance from government should not require hiring an attorney to understand where to go and what to do.

For Florida's future, Bennett said how he looks to the Century Commission for Sustainable Florida not to solve present problems but to guide us to the Florida we want 100 years from today. Part of that planning begins with the investment in new industries, such as biomedical engineering, green technology, and renewable energy.

Although Bennett presented some challenges to the NRLI Class and different perspectives, his statements regarding leadership and problem-solving were an excellent kick off to three days of fascinating presentations by numerous individuals intimately involved with natural resource issues at the highest levels of government in Florida.

Will Shefftal

Will Shefftal, a resource economist, gave Class VIII his thoughts on both the origins and success of NRLI and the natural resource issues concerning the Tallahassee area, which is a "biodiversity hot spot" from the cavern systems of Wakulla Springs to the 500,000 acres of National Forest, to the 300,000 acres of private game preserves. According to Shefftal, the area



Photo by Melody Ray-Culp

Sen. Mike Bennett addresses NRLI Class VIII during a welcome luncheon at Killlearn Country Club.

historically referred to as "the forgotten coast" should be renamed the "sustainably treasured coast."

Numerous preservation and restoration issues face the area including timber restoration and hydrologic restoration to improve and protect the area's resources. Shefftal mentioned that the main challenge will be maintaining the quality of state and federal lands as the population in the area doubles. He also suggested that we should focus on not only defining areas where no development should occur but also determining where development should and will occur and properly planning for expected growth in order to maintain the quality of life that initially attracted people to the area. Shefftal also advocated the need for joint public and private planning efforts to address these challenges. ■

UF Economist Posits: Will Florida be prepared for 2030?

Professor Rodney Clouser, University of Florida economist, provided a presentation on the growth impacts needing to be addressed by Florida public policy makers. Clouser began by stating that the policies of today “do not necessarily last.” He suggested that action more permanent than current executive orders of the governor or acts passed by the legislature is necessary to ensure solutions for Florida’s future.

Clouser espoused the need to think in much longer terms in our analysis of Florida’s future. For example, the current recession and “perceived” downturn in growth are, at most, blips on the graph in the overall trend of growth in Florida. Clouser further opined that the real limit on growth in Florida will not be recession, hurricanes, or insurance rates but the finite limits of our natural resources. Our management of those resources is paramount

in determining our growth and quality of life.

In a PowerPoint presentation, Clouser analyzed a number of economic, geographic, and demographic trends in Florida and a dozen of the “issues that must be addressed” by Florida policy makers.

Among Clouser’s concluding remarks was his statement that “government is best when it is closest to home.” This conclusion was based on his belief that an individual’s ability to participate in decision-making and have contact with and influence decision-makers was far more likely in a local setting. Clouser encouraged NRLI Fellows to recognize that the legislative process does not solely occur in Tallahassee and that they should participate in the legislative process in their respective local communities. ■

Consumer Fertilizer Task Force

Anderson (Andy) Rackely, head of the Agricultural Services division with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, headed the Consumer Fertilizer Task Force. During his presentation to the Fellows, Rackely shared his insights about the responsibilities involved in this collaborative leadership group whose goal was to reach a consensus on findings and recommendations related to the regulation and proper use and application of consumer fertilizers. After numerous heated discussions and through actively listening to each other, the fertilizer task force completed its task.

The following are some main points in collaborative leadership that Rackely emphasized:

- ◇ Everyone has a legitimate perspective.
- ◇ Try to take everyone’s perspective in consideration before coming to a consensus.
- ◇ Everyone impacts natural resources both negatively and positively.
- ◇ Better to be offensive than defensive.
- ◇ Learn what you don’t know.
- ◇ Always have good science.
- ◇ The final report is never the end it is just a launching pad for the rest.
- ◇ It is an ever evolving process. ■

Field Trip: State Capitol

Strange Partners

Environmental advocate Allison DeFoor, a Key West lawyer and priest as well as farmer, judge and sheriff and now Chamber of Commerce board member who currently works with EarthBalance®, urged Fellows to obtain broad consensus on environmental issues. He emphasized that consensus can come from unexpected places such as the business community, which is realizing that Florida's economy is driven by a healthy environment. He pointed out that economics is increasingly driving environmental protection through efforts such as mitigation banks, public-private land acquisitions such as Babcock Ranch, Everglades restoration, and carbon credits.

Consensus or Die

Senator Paula Dockery, a Republican from Polk County and member of the Committee on Environmental Preservation and Conservation, described her efforts in 2005 to build broad support for Senate Bill 444, which primarily addressed water supply planning. She instructed a 120-member stakeholder group to reach consensus or there would be no bill at all. With time and proper management of the consensus-building process, a high level of support allowed this far-reaching bill to be passed.

Broad Support

Jennifer Fitzwater, deputy secretary of policy and planning for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, contributed insight into broad-based efforts to extend the bonding ability of the Florida Forever land acquisition program, which expires in two years. Florida Forever has very strong public support. A coalition of supporters has held a stakeholder meeting and agreed to work to extend the existing program.

Water Sharing

Chuck Aller, a veteran state employee now with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, was instrumental in establishing the Office of Agricultural Water Policy, which develops agricultural Best Management Practices (BMPs) to reduce runoff of pollutants from the farms to surface waters. Responding to questions about proposed surface-water withdrawals from the St. Johns River basin, he pointed out that as groundwater has become more scarce in Florida, there has been more competition for surface waters. Aller suggested that broader discussion with stakeholders throughout the St. Johns River Basin about the potential for surface-water withdrawals may have avoided the current conflict between the downstream City of Jacksonville and upstream water utilities in Central Florida.

Environmental Challenges

Representative Curtis Richardson has served in the legislature for eight years, after acting as aide to both Lawton Chiles and Betty Castro. Rep. Richardson described Florida's more prominent environmental issues such as restoration of the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee, land acquisition through Florida Forever, offshore drilling, citing of coal plants, the Tri-State water war, north-south Florida water transfers, and a millage rate increase for the Northwest Florida Water Management District. He would not like for North and North Central Florida to become as urbanized as South Florida. ■



Photo by Carol Lippincott

Sculpted dolphins welcome visitors to the state capitol.



Diverse panel of legislative lobbyists discusses consensus building.

Stakeholder Panel: Lobbying the Legislature

Five of this year's 1,250 registered lobbyists comprised a panel moderated by Lisa Marie Phillips, who guided discussion of the process of consensus-building and stakeholder outreach. Represented were Keyna Cory of Associated Industries of Florida, Jay Liles of Florida Wildlife Federation, Ben Parks of Florida Farm Bureau, Trey Price of Florida Board of Realtors, and Ken Reecy of Florida Communities Trust of the Florida Department of Community Affairs. Hank Vinson with Florida Communities Trust, also a NRRI alumni, also attended.

Power of Partnerships

There was much agreement on the importance of coalitions and partnerships in successful passage of legislation. As with the morning panel, renewal of the popular Florida Forever land acquisition program was repeatedly offered as an example of effective collaboration among a diversity of stakeholders. The Florida Communities Trust, which awards about \$66 million per year in Florida Forever funds to local governments and private

land trusts, also relies heavily on stakeholder support because the operation of Florida Forever is defined by statute and determined by rulemaking. The Florida Water Alliance was offered as another example of a coalition that was recently rejuvenated to protect existing water funding. Echoing the earlier panelists, this group emphasized not being afraid to ally with unusual partners.

Influencing Legislators

There was discussion of the differences between lobbying on behalf of well-funded business interests and lobbying on behalf of non-profit environmental organizations. Campaign contributions continue to be a highly effective means of influencing legislation. In contrast, environmental coalitions can effectively harness the power of their memberships to write or call legislators. Strong public support and concerns about re-election can also influence the legislative process in support of the environment. ■

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Fellows and team proudly wearing matching NRLI-logo shirts in downtown Tallahassee. Fellow Kevin Hennessy from the law firm of Lewis, Longman & Walker generously provided the matching shirts, as well as the assistance of the firm's Tallahassee staff in scheduling panelists.

Session Summary

The thing that resonated throughout the session was that leaders do not know everything, and it is important to know when entering into collaboration that compromise is essential. Getting to know peoples' backgrounds and finding common ground should be priority.

Many ideas were discussed throughout this session, but most came back to just a handful of important things to remember. It is key to look at the big picture and not necessarily our own agenda when working with a

diverse group concerning a contentious issue. We should practice "active listening" and get involved in a collaborative leadership effort. Furthermore, we should not stereotype people based upon their beliefs and backgrounds. Compromise is a major goal, and multiple perspectives are necessary because one person cannot be an expert on all of the issues involved. ■

This report forms part of a series written by current NRLI Fellows. Reports represent and are a product of the experiential learning process that is a highlight of the NRLI program and have not been formally peer reviewed.