

# ***EDITORIAL PAGE***

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## **Mission Impossible?**

By Larry Gordon, Assistant Editor

The term "mission" as commonly defined by many planners, environmental administrators and managers is "a statement indicating the advocacy position of the agency, and the clientele served." Many environmental health agencies appear to advocate a quality environment and a desire to serve the total public rather than a limited segment of it. Certain types of agencies, such as agriculture departments, appropriately have a mission of promoting the interests of a specific component of our society.

Many of us naively assume that all of our peer brethren and agencies understand and practice the concept of "mission" and are really in a position to promote environmental health and protect the health of our citizens. We may be shocked, however, at the actions and interests of some of our peers who appear to be 'in business to protect polluting interests and aid in insuring resource development.

Government, at all levels, has a multitude of agencies and programs charged with protecting and promoting specific interests. Such agencies include departments of commerce and development and, in the private sector, chambers of commerce. Departments of natural resources, parks and recreation, agriculture, mining, and interior may have an environmental concern when they are in fact charged with utilizing and developing environmental resources rather than protecting the environment. So we are left with the question, "Who protects the health of the total public through effective environmental management?"

We have all observed that regulatory officials frequently find it more comfortable to ally themselves with interests they are charged with regulating than to effectively and objectively carry out their regulatory functions. Additionally, many important environmental decisions affecting the total public continue to be made in the absence of the light of public opinion and public scrutiny behind closed doors. No wonder many of our

citizens have lost faith in agencies which were originally designed and created to serve and protect the total public.

The number of Americans who are worried about pollution has reached record peaks, according to a recent Harris survey. Part of the reason people are worried about pollution is the widely held opinion that neither government nor industry is doing an adequate control job. However, the public feels that citizen environmental protection groups and consumer groups are doing a good job.

I have frequently observed that many of our legislators have a better concept of what environmental advocacy and consumer protection means than do some of our officials charged with administering such programs. And, we must all be sincerely thankful for the energy and persistence of many of our citizen activist groups that serve as effective watchdogs for the public interest and to remind agencies of their proper mission.

A few years ago I attended a national meeting of environmental health professionals which held an evening "cracker barrel" session on public information. Many of the environmental health personnel there were more concerned with preventing the news media from learning about cases of food-borne illness than with protecting the public and understanding the vital necessity of open public information. These individuals sounded more like representatives of trade groups than officials of tax-supported environmental health agencies.

At other meetings I have listened in astonishment to environmental health officials who seem more interested in protecting violators of air or water pollution regulations than in protecting the health of our citizens. Some of these same individuals seem more prone to use emission and discharge data furnished by the polluters than by other knowledgeable interests and groups.

It is easy to become allied with those interests we are charged with regulating. It is more difficult to maintain and practice a mission of environmental quality advocacy and consumer protection. And sometimes we must be reminded (this is a reminder) that such a mission is not impossible!