Holding the line for Narragansett Bay

Congress threatens Rhode Island’s air, water

Over the past year, with the public’s attention focused on the economy, anti-environmental extremists in Congress have quietly launched an all-out attack on the laws that protect Rhode Island’s waters, from Narragansett Bay to the Sakonnet River—as well as the air we breathe and the places we love.

It’s the most radical, reckless attack on our environment in our lifetimes—and it’s happening under the radar, through provisions slipped into massive budget bills.

191 anti-environment votes

According to U.S. Rep. Henry Waxman, lawmakers cast an incredible 191 roll-call votes in 2011 on measures that would block the EPA from keeping our waters clean, making our air safer to breathe, or enforcing other environmental protections.

In February, the House rammed through a budget bill that took aim at our rivers and streams, our air, and funding for national parks. In August, the U.S. House passed a bill containing 39 separate environmental attacks.

In 2011, House lawmakers cast 191 roll-call votes on anti-environment measures, including ones that would allow more pollution of Rhode Island’s air and water.

The voting record of Rhode Island’s representatives has been strong. Reps. David Cicilline and Jim Langevin have been consistent environmental supporters in the House, voting with the environment more than 95 percent of the time.

So far, we’ve blocked the attacks

So far, none of these attacks have become law, with Environment Rhode Island research, advocacy and grassroots action helping to hold the line.

In 2011, we released five research reports, including one entitled “Dirty Energy’s Assault on our Health: Mercury,” which helped spotlight the consequences of lowering our guard against pollution. We’ve personally made our case to members of our congressional delegation and their aides in both Rhode Island and Washington, D.C.

Our members have called, emailed and petitioned their lawmakers to reject any bills that threaten our state’s air and water.

With the Senate rejecting four of the worst proposals this fall, the tide might be starting to turn. We’ll keep you informed, so you can let your lawmakers know where you stand. Visit our new website to sign up for action alerts: www.EnvironmentRhodeIsland.org

Find out how your representatives in Congress are voting on the environment.

Visit our online scorecard at www.EnvironmentAmerica.org/scorecard and select Rhode Island.
Recent action

54.5 mpg standard nears finish line
This summer, the Obama administration announced a plan to require cars and trucks to meet a 54.5 miles per gallon standard by 2025. In November, the administration opened a public comment period on the proposed standards.

The standards would mark the single biggest step this country has ever taken to cut global warming pollution, and benefits would also be felt closer to home. By reducing oil consumption, the proposed standards would generate annual savings of $148 million by 2020 in Rhode Island alone.

Unfortunately, with the National Auto Dealers Association lobbying to weaken the new standards, and some of their allies in Congress vowing to block it altogether, this victory is not yet a done deal.

Our staff and members are urging the Obama administration to seize this important opportunity to get America off oil and stop global warming.

The way forward on global warming
With gridlock on energy and climate policy in Congress, it is clearer than ever that innovative states such as Rhode Island must take matters into their own hands to dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Environment Rhode Island’s recent report “The Way Forward on Global Warming” finds that by adopting a suite of renewable energy and energy efficiency policies here in Rhode Island, we have the potential to reduce our carbon dioxide emissions from 2008 levels by more than 20 percent by 2020 — and close to 50 percent by 2030.

What we need to do now is move swiftly on this agenda and take action to reduce emissions in any way we can. By showing that these solutions work, we can use our success to lead the way on climate policy.

To our members

Over the years my colleagues and I, along with members like you who make our work possible, have made some real progress toward protecting the air we breathe, water we drink, and special places we enjoy.

That’s why it was so troubling in 2011 to see the worst assault on the environment of our lifetimes and possibly ever. Extremists in Congress are releasing attack after attack, often hidden in other legislation, that would reverse environmental protections we’ve worked so hard to achieve.

Fortunately, the response from a concerned public has been strong, and you’ll read in this season’s updates how we’re forging ahead and countering this reckless legislation on all fronts. As always, I thank you for supporting us, and I’ll be counting on you in the future to continue defending the places we love and values we share.

Sincerely,

John Rumpler
For Environment Rhode Island
The cost of our dependence on oil is out of control—and it’s putting the health, welfare, and security of Rhode Island families at risk. Over the past year, our oil consumption has transferred more than $2 billion out of our state to oil companies and oil-producing nations—eating up paychecks, undermining our economic recovery, and costing our state jobs.

But the economic costs are only the beginning of the true costs of our oil dependence. Oil consumption is a leading cause of air pollution, which triggers millions of asthma attacks and other respiratory problems every year. Drilling for oil threatens our beaches and oceans with catastrophic accidents on the scale of 2010’s Deepwater Horizon disaster. And our oil consumption produces more global warming pollution than any other energy source, a threat that is especially profound in Rhode Island, with our miles of coastline and high vulnerability to flooding.

Senators, experts turn out for forum
That’s why Environment Rhode Island hosted a Get Off Oil forum in early November to educate leaders and concerned citizens about the tragic costs of our oil dependence—and to get them fired up about tackling the problem.

We were excited to be joined by Rhode Island’s U.S. Senators Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse, along with experts on the environment, clean energy, and public health.

Held at a packed Brown University lecture hall, the event was attended by members of Environment Rhode Island, the local community, other environmental and energy groups, the academic community, and the Rhode Island General Assembly.

As the panelists emphasized, the problem of our oil dependence is profound. However, the take-away message from the forum was clear: We can do better than continuing to depend on this dirty, dangerous, and increasingly expensive energy source. And we have the technology and the policy prescriptions available to begin to transition our economy off oil and onto clean alternatives.

Key to oil-free future: efficiency, transit
According to the panelists, that’s going to happen largely through three key strategies: increasing the energy efficiency of our vehicles and buildings; investing in technologies that can replace oil with clean, domestically produced alternatives; and working at both the state and federal levels to provide Americans with access to a wide array of transportation choices, including public transit.

For decades, America’s transportation and energy policies have prioritized highways over railways, SUVs over fuel-efficient vehicles, and subsidies to oil companies over investments in clean fuels.

Getting Rhode Island—and the nation—off oil will require bold leadership and the sustained commitment of policymakers. Our successful event demonstrated that many of us have realized that it’s time to get started.
In December, the Environmental Protection Agency moved ahead with efforts to significantly reduce mercury, soot and smog pollution from power plants.

We expect these standards to save more than 11,000 lives every year. We built support across Rhode Island to ensure these rules were adopted:

- Following our reports earlier in the year on the health effects of ozone and mercury pollution, we released a report this fall looking at the number of days with dangerous smog levels.
- We partnered with our national coalition of allies to help motivate more than 800,000 people across America to send the EPA public comments in support of strong action on mercury—no other single EPA rule has ever received so much public support.