

ENLIBRA WILL MEAN BUSINESS AS USUAL IN TERMS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

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Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt and Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber last year unveiled what they called a new approach to resolving environmental problems in the West: enlibra. It's a make-believe term that Leavitt thought up, and it basically constitutes a set of golden rules that they hope will govern environmental issues for the next millenium.

Astute politicians like Leavitt know that they cannot permit industries to continue to pollute and exploit the West anymore with the open bravado displayed until now. But they have proposed a solution that amounts to business as usual with a smile.

The principles involve giving local and state governments the authority to manage environmental issues and basing environmental decisions on a recognition of the costs and benefits involved. That's a nice way of saying, "We're going to place a dollar figure on fundamental rights like clean air, water and open space."

The idea is purportedly to bring everyone to the table and resolve issues through mutual respect and discussion -- a great concept. The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance endorses processes that encourage participation by all stakeholders.

That said, let's look beyond the happy talk to see how public involvement, environmental protection and problem resolution really ensue, Utah-style. It's a scary picture of how the governor's proposal would likely play out, and it breathes life into every doubt already expressed about enlibra.

First, states have always been free to implement environmental standards that protect the public from toxic wastes, dirty air and polluted water. Problem is, they never do. It wasn't until Congress passed federal legislation like the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act that Americans finally got some relief.

Leavitt's Utah is typical of the foot-dragging state approach; it has a lousy environmental protection record. The Wasatch Front is mired in thick brown air pollution every winter and violates federal standards for particulates and ozone every year. Leavitt's response? Sue the federal government to attack the standards, which he did in 1994.

Meanwhile, Salt Lake City residents are still choking on some of the dirtiest air in the nation.

The governor has also failed to come to terms with urban sprawl and traffic congestion. His solution is to build more highways, including one, the Legacy Highway, that would destroy wetlands and habitat for thousands of shorebirds, hawks, eagles and other species along the Great Salt Lake.

When the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers rejected the highway alignment because it would destroy too many wetlands, the governor tried to go over the heads of the local Corps officials and went straight to Washington.

Also, the state has intervened time and again to block federal protection for endangered species in Utah, seeking vague conservation agreements instead of real protection for species in danger of disappearing forever. And it wasn't until the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conditioned approval of a weakened state-sponsored plan for the Virgin River on the participation of environmentalists that the state grudgingly agreed to open the process to us.

Further, while the governor characterizes federal efforts to protect the environment as interference with states' rights, he doesn't hesitate to interfere with the federal government's management of its own lands.

For example, in 1996 Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt began an internal review of the wilderness potential of federal public lands in Utah that had long been proposed for wilderness designation. Instead of coming to the table for an open discussion, the governor tried to conceal the data by convincing a Utah judge to stop the inventory. He eventually lost on appeal, but for over a year the federal government couldn't even gather basic data.

That was only part of the governor's continuing attempts to block wilderness designation for some of the country's most breathtaking lands. In 1995, he backed a proposal that would designate only 2 million acres of the 22 million acres of BLM lands as wilderness. In the course of developing the bill, he excluded environmentalists from what should have been open public meetings with county officials and devised a public-hearing strategy that sought to minimize participation from wilderness supporters.

And what about inviting everyone to the table? Just this year, the governor blocked the appointment of a representative from SUWA to the BLM's Resource Advisory Council. The council influences policy on issues like grazing and land protection for BLM lands in Utah. The rules require that certain seats be occupied by environmental representatives, yet SUWA, which focuses on the protection of BLM lands and has more members than any other environmental group in Utah, was barred from the table.

The governor has already tried to marginalize those who question enlbra by labelling them as essentially troublemakers. But anyone who cares about open space, clean air, clean water, and the protection of our last wild places would be legitimately concerned about the governor's record. Where was the governor while we've been calling for balance for years in a system where development and industrial interests have historically called all the shots?

Westerners deserved firm commitments to protect the environment, and they have already begun to chart a new course where environmental protection, open space, human health and land preservation are valued not as luxuries available only upon industry's acquiescence, but as necessities.