

A CONVERSATION WITH RICK ENGLER ON THE ENVIRONMENT

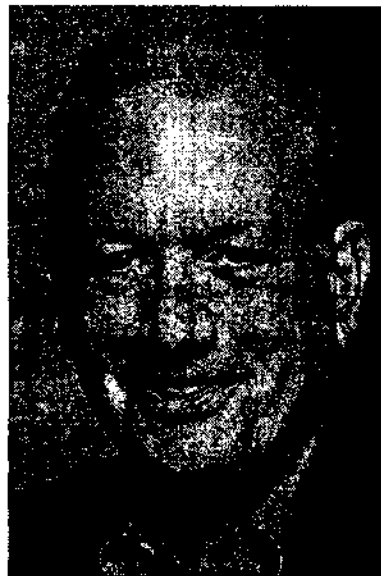
Christie talks a good game, but hasn't delivered much yet

Gov. Chris Christie says he's good for the environment. He's touted his eco-friendly accomplishments, citing his opposition to drilling off the Jersey coastline and bills he signed to help protect the waters of Barnegat Bay in Ocean County. But Rick Engler, director of the New Jersey Work Environment Council, a coalition of 70 labor, environmental and community groups, says he isn't buying it. He gave editorial writer Julie O'Connor his own take on Christie's green record.

Q. What do you think of Christie's record on the environment?

A. Overall, he does not have a green record. Some of his actions provide green cover for actually making systemic changes that can harm workers and the environment, like the Department of Environmental Protection's proposed waiver rule. It gives powerful corporations a chance to get special treatment by DEP, and not have to comply with long-standing safeguards.

Given the overwhelming sentiment of New Jersey's public against drilling off the coast, opposing it is quite an easy lift. But the way the governor's red tape review is being implemented suggests that both



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workers and the environment are going to face increasing dangers in coming years.

Q. What sort of dangers?

A. For example, there's a strong rumor that our state's "chemical right to know law," which requires that information about toxic chemicals be shared with workers and the broader public, is about to be weakened. It's the type of rule the red tape commission could look at critically because of some minimal costs, without evaluating any of the benefits — like people not getting injured or sick

from long-term toxic exposure.

The governor has directed the DEP, as well as other agencies, to look at its operations in light of reduced staffing. But we think that's cover for weakening many important programs.

Q. You say there's a bipartisan attack on the role of state government in protecting the environment, worker safety and public health. Why?

A. There are many legislators, including Democrats, who believe weakening safeguards will improve the business climate and lead to more new jobs. But we don't see evidence of that. New Jersey's public doesn't want to end up like Mississippi or Texas, with very weak worker, environmental and health safeguards.

Assemblymen John Burzichelli (D-Gloucester) continues to promote his bill that would block New Jersey from issuing rules that exceed federal standards. This would have a huge impact on everything from oil spills to evacuation plans, from emergencies at atomic power plants to food safety. Only because of a tremendous outcry was there no vote on this legislation. But it remains a threat.

The federal response to the oil spill in the Gulf was inadequate. New Jersey has stronger rules about response, and we think that's important in the event of a major oil spill

into New York Bay. It's so ironic that at a time when there are more calls for oversight, the response of many New Jersey legislators is to try to weaken oversight.

Q. What sort of relationship does Christie have with environmental groups in New Jersey?

A. The environmental community is very skeptical of the Christie administration's efforts. The same is true for labor unions. We think there's a divide-and-conquer strategy here, where agreements have been made with particular organizations while access has been denied to others.

It's critical for labor and environmental organizations to work together. We're facing very powerful corporate forces that support the administration.

Q. Who has Christie's ear in the environmental community?

A. The governor has been more active in trying to protect the environment in areas that have a high Republican turnout, like Monmouth and Ocean counties.

But advocates in urban areas were very disappointed in his recent executive order for controlling cancer-causing diesel emissions, which they found woefully inadequate.

It was a very limited pilot project that put off actual, serious requirements.

Q. What's been the reaction to Christie's skepticism on global warming?

A. There were a lot of sighs of disbelief. Christie indicated he would sit down to meet with some scientists to talk about climate change.

Given that the overwhelming majority of scientists believe that global warming exists, it's time the governor became more knowledgeable about this issue and took further steps.

At the very least he should not be pulling New Jersey out of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, a positive multistate effort to address climate change.

Q. What are some of the biggest upcoming battles over the environment?

A. The most pressing issue is the right of New Jersey to issue safeguards that exceed federal standards. Bipartisan bills in the legislature would prevent state agencies from issuing protections that exceed federal standards without the state legislature voting on every word.

This would radically change the ability of the state to protect its citizens. Even Christie has raised questions about this draconian proposal.

It varies from his own executive order on the subject, which includes certain exceptions in which a stronger protection can be justified.

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