

THE ART OF Doublespeak

How do you teach conservative Republicans to talk about the environment? Political consultant Frank Luntz has the answer.

NORTON AND VENEMAN open with a nod to Luntz's number one talking point: "Assure your audience that you are committed to 'preserving and protecting' the environment, but that it 'can be done more wisely and effectively.'" By acknowledging the gravity of wetlands loss, the secretaries heed Luntz's advice to first "establish your environmental bona fides." But while there may be little debate about whether to protect wetlands, there is significant doubt about whether Norton and Veneman are doing so. In practice, according to Julie Sibbing, wetlands specialist at the National Wildlife Federation, the administration is working to "actively eliminate" a policy first endorsed by George W. Bush's father, which calls for a halt in the loss of total wetlands acreage.

NO WONDER the editorial carefully avoids mentioning the administration's plans for scaling back the Clean Water Act: "When we talk about 'rolling back regulations' involving the environment, we are sending a signal Americans don't support," Luntz advises. Unfortunately, the administration's newly proposed regulations do just that. Issued in response to a 2001 Supreme Court case that challenged federal authority to regulate wetlands, the Bush proposals go to the other extreme, exempting certain types of wetlands from the Clean Water Act entirely and requiring regional offices of the Army Corps of Engineers to get approval from headquarters in Washington to designate the rest. The result: as many as 20 million acres of wetlands suddenly unprotected, estimates EPA.

IN HIS ADVICE on discussing another environmental issue, global warming, Luntz instructs Republicans to "emphasize the voluntary actions and environmental progress already underway." Norton and Veneman creatively apply the concept to wetlands, peppering their editorial with the words

"voluntary" (three mentions), "cooperative" (two mentions), and public-private "partnerships" (five mentions), all of which contrast with the "government-knows-best" approach to regulation that Luntz decries. But voluntary wetlands programs, under which landowners are paid to protect wetlands on their property,

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There's More Than One

GALE NORTON
AND ANN VENEMAN

WASHINGTON
Every year, the federal government and Americans across the country preserve, restore and enhance thousands of acres of wetlands through cooperative conservation efforts, partnerships and voluntary programs. Unfortunately, that's not the news that most Americans read about. Instead, the focus has been on the wetlands regulatory program.

Wetlands are essential to a healthy environment. They filter water, provide habitat for wildlife and offer opportunities for recreation. Over the past century, the United States has lost slightly more than half its wetlands, leaving about 105 million acres of intertidal basins, coastal estuaries, saltwater marshes and freshwater ponds, swamps and lakeside areas.

The debate is not whether to protect wetlands, but how. For the last 25 years, government officials and environmental activists have largely relied on the Clean Water Act's regulations to protect wetlands. That focus has given short shrift to the role nonregulatory conservation—the willing partnerships between citizens and all levels of government—can play.

These programs—in which the government provides funds and technical assistance to individuals and organizations for the rehabilitation of both public and privately owned wetlands—have proved highly effective. In 2000, the last year for which complete figures are available, 1.96 million acres of wetlands were safeguarded and preserved through nonregulatory efforts. In some cases, already protected wetlands were given further protection. In other cases, entirely new wetlands were set aside.

For instance, more than 200,000 acres of wetlands in the Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuges were rehabilitated. Two thousand acres of wetlands were added to the refuges and 1.4 million acres of protected land continued to be managed with care. Other public-private partnerships created, restored or protected an additional 108,000 acres of wetlands.

What's more, these figures actually understate the total wetlands preserved through voluntary efforts. For example, they do not include wetlands restored or protected by private landowners working on their own—such as the New England Forestry Foundation's Pingree Forest easement in Maine, which protects 72,000 acres of wetlands.

These figures also do not take into account the expansion in citizen stew-

lack any significant enforcement or oversight mechanisms. The Clean Water Act is the real incentive behind any voluntary efforts, says Melissa Samet, senior director of water resources at American Rivers. "If you didn't have the regulations," she says, "you would never get the partnerships either."

Just before last November's elections, Republican Party heavies received a 16-page memo—more of a tutorial, really—on how to sound like an environmentalist. Authored by conservative political strategist Frank Luntz (whose previous credits include Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America"), the memo noted that "[t]he environment is probably the single issue on which Republicans in general—and President Bush in par-

ticular—are vulnerable." Luntz's solution? Conservatives should alter not their environmental policies, but their vocabulary. "We have to get the talk right," Luntz concludes. The Bush administration has since echoed the Luntz approach with an eerie fidelity. In this March 12 *New York Times* editorial, Interior Secretary Gale Norton and Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman offer their own version of Luntz-speak. —EVAN RATLIFF

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Way to Protect Wetlands

ardship and cooperative conservation programs under the Bush administration. These efforts accelerate wetland protection through private-federal collaboration. For example, under the Interior Department's Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, landowners restored 48,800 wetland acres in 2001 and 65,000 acres in 2002.

President Bush wants to build on these efforts. The president's 2004 budget includes a \$9 million increase for the partners program and adds \$25.5 million to the refuge operating budget. The Agriculture Department budget calls for a 72 percent increase in financing for wetland conservation efforts on farms.

Last May, the president signed a farm bill that expanded the Agriculture Department's Wetlands Reserve Program. Through this initiative, which encourages farmers to rehabilitate wetlands and control agricultural runoff, we will be able to restore 1.25 million acres of wetlands—a land area roughly the size of Delaware—over the next five years. This acreage will supplement the roughly 1.28 million acres already enrolled in the program.

The Interior Department's Partners program typifies private-federal stewardship efforts. These projects are modest in scale and voluntary. But cumulatively, they add up to big gains for wetlands protection.

In Orange County, N.C., one extended family joined with the partner program and Natural Resource Conservation Service to restore 17 acres of wetlands in 2001. Now, land that was once cultivated is home to aquatic plants and insects, clams, frogs, reptiles, deer, herons and egrets. In Cooperstown, N.Y., Earle Petersen created the Greenwood Conservancy and, with government support, restored two wetlands on what had once been an abandoned dairy farm. And in Oregon's Sprague River Valley, Dan and Kathy Ridgeway worked in partnership with the government to repair 260 acres of wetlands along 2.5 miles of riverfront. Their project is a modest yet important step to restoring ecological health to the Klamath Basin.

Of course, no single partnership will conserve America's wetlands. But taken collectively, the partnerships point to a compelling strategy. If government is to meet its goal of wetlands conservation, it must reach beyond traditional regulations. By leveraging public dollars to expand volunteer partnerships, we can address the needs of wetlands and meet or exceed the goals we have set for ourselves. □

Gale Norton is secretary of the interior. Ann Veneman is secretary of agriculture.

LUNTZ INSTRUCTS Republicans to stress the kinds of "local" efforts Norton and Veneman plug here over the "technicalities of environmental law." "People believe they know better than do nameless, faceless federal bureaucrats how to preserve and protect *their* local environment," the memo says. In the case of wetlands, few would disagree that the small-scale partnerships the secretaries describe are valuable. But do they really add up to "big gains?" According to a National Academy of Sciences report, wetlands restoration is notoriously difficult; as little as 20 percent of projects to replace or restore wetlands succeed. In a Luntzian world, such "technicalities" are beside the point: "Republicans need to focus more on the *benefits* the public expects and spend less time debating *process*." In other words, a 17-acre wetland, now restored and home to a veritable Noah's ark of wetland fauna, is an image the secretaries are counting on you to care about—not the fact that the administration wants to slash by 60 percent the overall budget to acquire wetlands for protection.

"WHILE WE MAY have lost the environmental communications battle in the past," concludes Luntz, "the war is not over." Indeed, Norton and Veneman go on the offensive, airbrushing the administration's regulations rollback, never stating what the "goals we have set for ourselves" actually are. The overall impression, however, is that American wetlands are safe in the hands of caring Republicans, precisely what Luntz advises. Yet offering partnerships and minor budget increases as a fresh alternative to regulations, says Sibbing, "is absurd. It's promoting a lot of programs that have been around for a number of years and have still not prevented the further loss of wetlands." Yet as Luntz sagely observes, sometimes words speak louder than actions. "A compelling story," he writes, "even if factually inaccurate, can be more emotionally compelling than a dry recitation of the truth."