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Note to Members - International Joint Commission Hearing in Rochester
February 4, 1970*

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#68

THE ROCHESTER COMMITTEE FOR SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION
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The hearing by the IJC on Pollution of Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, and the International Portion of the St. Lawrence River proved to be both exciting and significant. A critical juncture of pollution abatement efforts was dramatized.

I issued two separate statements, acting individually, as there was no time for the required R.C.S.I. monitoring. In support of these statements I offered four R.C.S.I. Bulletins, including pre-issue copies of the February 1970 Bulletin by Olga and George Berg. Also, my manuscript, "Revelle in Rochester, The Education of a Community" was submitted. Copies of the two statements and the manuscript are available from the R.C.S.I. or from H. S. Forest, Bailey Science Building, SUNY College, Geneseo, New York 14454.

The leadership of the R.C.S.I. was demonstrated as the hearings developed.

1. "How can it be...", a commissioner asked Sen. Frank Van Lare, "that the Rochester area has made such progress on its own initiative?" Van Lare included R.C.S.I. in his credits (he neglected his own considerable contributions).

The "Revelle..." manuscript provides the Commission with a five year record and analysis of the extraordinary achievement.

2. The IJC has taken a stand for the quickest possible removal of phosphorus from detergents, but the detergent industry has mounted the strongest possible counter attack (complete with Madison Avenue public relations men, pretty girls, and tape recorders taking down every opposing word).

R.C.S.I. Bulletins provided information that:

1. The phosphorus content of detergents varies considerably, but the consumer is not informed of the fact. The phosphate contribution from washing clothes equals or exceeds the amount in human waste.
2. There is already at least one very promising substitute, which would NOT increase the cost significantly (EDTA).

An industry spokesman (and an industry chemist, in private) confirmed that NTA (closely related to EDTA) was quickly degraded by bacteria, and only extensive field tests were needed to obtain confirmation of its environmental harmlessness.

3. The industry has mustered considerable experimental evidence against the judgment to remove phosphorus. I was able to point out that the very scientists whose work they used, had themselves recommended the New York nutrient removal policy.

The unexpected hero of the round was the highly reputable limnologist of the University of Minnesota, Dr. Joseph Shapiro, whose work had also been quoted. Appearing on his own behalf, Dr. Shapiro (in a cold, controlled rage) ripped the anti-phosphorus case to bits, by showing that data had been distorted, and that there had been a gross lack of common sense which a field investigator uses.

4. If a confusion can be created as to the value of abatement efforts, hesitation and delays will result....and environmental damage will result while valuable time is lost.

My second statement advocated that scientific advisory boards be employed at every decision-making level. The efforts of the R.C.S.I., the Committee to Save Cayuga Lake and the Health Commissioner's advisory committee on algae were cited as prototypes. As if to provide a deliberate example to prove the need, the fight over phosphorus erupted. The Commission had been told that facts would not resolve complex questions, but that subjective judgment was needed as to whether chances should be taken with the environment. Thus, the need for scientific advisory groups was underscored.

Dr. David J. Wilson, former R.C.S.I. Vice-President and Chairman of the Water Pollution Sub-Committee has been instrumental in organizing the Nashville (Tenn.) Committee for Scientific Information. He is busily finding and reporting grossly polluted water in his new environment. In a recent letter he wrote:

"More and more, as I look back on what the R.C.S.I. has accomplished, I become convinced that we have managed to invent and carry out something both unique and vital to the continued survival of our society. I should not be terribly surprised if historians 50 years hence mark these happenings in St. Louis, Rochester, etc. as a major turning point in American History. I am sure that this sounds absurd now, but I nevertheless believe that what we have done and are doing is of this magnitude."

Herman S. Forest
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Chairman, Water Pollution Sub-Committee