

NRDC President Gina McCarthy Sketches Vision of Clean Energy Future

By Kevin Adler, April 15, 2020



Speaking at the Energy Bar Association's spring meeting held as a stripped-down virtual conference on April 15, due to COVID-19 precautions, former EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy shared her perspective on natural gas and clean energy.

McCarthy, who became president and CEO of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) in January 2020, said that she sees a clean environment and clean energy as a public health issue. Speaking of her work at EPA under President Obama, she said the focus at the time was "environmental and public health benefits without shutting down the economy...do[ing] it in a way that hopefully benefited the economy and built jobs.

"Climate change isn't a 'planetary problem', it's a 'people' [public health] problem.... It is about saving lives and about ensuring continued growth in a clean economy."

While the reduction in vehicle travel in the last month due to COVID-19 is cleaning up the air globally, McCarthy said that she realizes it's not a realistic way to reduce air pollution. "I understand people in India will see the Himalayas for the first time, and that's great. And maybe they won't want to go back to the way it was...but jobs are still the challenge," she said. "Maybe these times are giving us a sense of the importance of science and of working together.... Science tells you truths you need to act on."

At NRDC, McCarthy said she sees her role in part as defending the use of scientists. "I will push back on what I

see as pretty consistent attacks on science and on scientists in government,” she said. “I think people are starting to get it...to understand we need experts.”

As with other environmental groups, NRDC is wary of the Trump administration using the current health crisis to relax environmental laws and promote fossil fuel use. “We will push back on some of the rollbacks,” she said, citing this week’s decision by EPA not to tighten particulate standards and the rollbacks of mercury emissions standards on coal-fired power plants and auto efficiency. “Weakening the particulate standard is not consistent with the science,” she said.

“In the economic stimulus, many of the dollars we are investing to reinvigorate the economy...might bring us back to reliance on fossil fuels,” she said. “But we need to recognize the shifts in clean energy as we move forward.”

NRDC is seeking to work with Congress on creative ways to use the stimulus or future stimulus packages, she said. “How can funds be used in a sustainable way?” she asked. “The airlines should be required to make concerted effort to reduce emissions. Energy efficiency is at somewhat of a standstill right now – with technicians not allowed in homes – so can we look for other forms of incentives to support renewables?”

McCarthy contrasted the Trump administration’s approach of telling EPA and other agencies to exercise enforcement leniency with the Obama administration’s actions with funding to pull out of the financial crisis in 2009. The Obama administration provided loans to major US automakers, but in turn they committed to improving auto efficiency by an extra 4-5%, she said. The Trump administration, instead of rolling back efficiency standards, could have been more creative in helping automakers, such as providing “a bump-up on EV credits,” she said.

Meanwhile, she said the Trump administration is racing to roll back the rules now because the clock is ticking on the Congressional Review Act. “If they don’t win the election, the Congressional Review Act can more easily undo regulations than a new law and new rulemaking,” she said. “That’s what this is really all about.”

And she made it clear that, in NRDC’s view, natural gas use needs to be flattened or reduced to slow climate change. “We are not going to focus on cleaner energy, but on clean energy,” she said. “The shift to natural gas was great, but it has its challenges.... We need to move beyond gas.”

As a final note, she said that states and cities are the key laboratories for innovative solutions to climate change. “The federal government never was really designed to be a first actor [on innovation],” she said. “[The federal government’s role is] to wait to see what states have done and intervene...when effective. We have hundreds of cities moving forward on clean energy, the housing sector, the transportation sector. It is necessary they do that. What I hoping to do at NRDC is to make that a more comfortable and speedy process at city and state level.”

US cities and states that have committed to meeting the Paris Climate Treaty’s emissions goals would, collectively, represent the third-largest economy in the world, she said. “It’s simply because they are looking at these opportunities not just to address climate change...but looking at it because it saves money and grows jobs,” she said.