

PRAIRIE FLYER

Newsletter of the Sierra Club Prairie Group ■ East-Central Illinois ■ Jan./Feb./Mar. 2007

ONE EARTH, ONE CHANCE®

Upcoming Events

Regular meetings of the Prairie Group are held in the Geneva Room at the McKinley Foundation, 809 S. 5th Street (at the corner of 5th and Daniel), at 7 p.m. on the second **Tuesday** of each month unless otherwise noted. Refreshments always provided! For more information, visit <http://illinois.sierraclub.org/prairie>.

January 9

- Nature Poetry and Prose Night

Thoreau, Emerson, Abbey, Dillard, and so many more — we all have our favorite nature writers whose words have deepened our connection to wild places and our commitment to their preservation. Come share a few of those words with us during this fun annual event, when Sierrans read aloud from texts celebrating nature. Excerpts should be around 250 to 300 words long. Original work by local writers is also most welcome!

February 13

- Prairie Group Executive Committee Planning

The ExCom meets to plan activities for the second quarter of 2007. We will also be assigning open positions to newly-appointed ExCom members and completing required paperwork formalizing our new configuration.

March 13

- Panel Discussion on Local Bike Transit Developments

Invited speakers will discuss recent initiatives for encouraging bicycle use and safety as part of the local transportation mix. Panelists TBA; please check our website (<http://illinois.sierraclub.org/prairie>) for details as the meeting date approaches.

Mercury and YOU

by Kirstin Repogle

News stories, fish advisories, and articles in your Sierra Club literature all talk about the hazards of mercury. The scientific evidence is clear — at low levels it affects the development of unborn babies and, if present at high enough concentrations, it can increase the risk of serious health problems, such as heart disease, in adults. But the threat to any one of us as an individual can seem minuscule, so we assume we're okay.

Would you like to know if that's true? This winter, the Prairie Group is hosting a "Get Tested!" event with the help of Timothy John's salon! This is your opportunity to learn — confidentially and free of charge — your personal "body burden" of mercury. This might be of particular interest to young women thinking about starting or adding to their families in the next few years, but the event is open to anyone with an interest in participating.

Here's what happens: a small amount of your hair is cut near the root and sent to the Environmental Quality Institute

(EQI) at the University of North Carolina-Asheville for processing. The results are returned to you along with information on how to reduce your exposure to this toxin.

By participating in this hair testing event, your data will be added to the ongoing study at EQI. To date, more than 6,600 people of all ages and from all 50 states

Mercury, continued on 4th page

Mercury Hair Testing Event

Timothy John Salon
404 W. Green Street, Urbana
Saturday, February 17
8:30-10:30 a.m.
344.4270

Free and confidential testing to determine your mercury levels. Everyone is welcome.

Please call the salon to schedule an appointment so that we have the correct number of kits on hand. The entire process will take about 10 minutes.



Political Forum panelists Heather Stevenson, David Gill, Naomi Jakobsson, Rex Bradfield, Tom Abrams, and Mike Frerichs. Photo by Jim Beauchamp.

Political Forum on the Environment

by Jim Beauchamp

On Sept. 12, 2006, 6-ish candidates participated in a Prairie Group-sponsored forum at the Urbana City Council Chambers. I say "ish" because one of the candidates, Tim Johnson, congressman for the 15th U.S. House District in Illinois, had to be in Washington and was not able to attend. However, he was represented by his daughter, Heather Stevenson, who left after reading a statement detailing Rep. Johnson's environmental record in the House. The candidates present were Dr. David Gill, Johnson's Democratic opponent; 103rd District State Representative candidates Naomi Jakobsson (Democrat, incumbent); Rex Bradfield (Republican); Tom Abram (Green); and 52nd District State Senate candidates Mike Frerichs (Democrat) and Joe Parnarauskis (Socialist Equality). Judy Meyers, the 52nd District Republican candidate, was unable to attend.

Some 35 persons attended. Cynthia Hoyle moderated, and Dick Bishop was the timekeeper. The forum was televised and broadcast live on Urbana Public Television cable Channel 6 and also at ten different times during September and October. So many throughout the Channel 6 viewing area were able to see and hear the forum. We know how the November election turned out; nevertheless, it's useful to review the forum to see how the winners and losers thought about environmental issues, since they offer a distillation of current environmental thought in central Illinois.

The forum's purpose was to provide an opportunity for the public to hear the candidates' responses to environmental questions posed by the Prairie Group and by audience members. While all candidates appeared to be "green," it was possible to detect how much based on their answers to a variety of questions.

Tom Abram, who works at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Smart Energy Design Assistance Center, was perhaps the most environmentally-knowledgeable candidate on the panel. He warned that because Illinois is the sixth largest contributor to global warming in the U.S. and the end of cheap oil has arrived, Illinois needs to invest heavily in clean renewable energy and energy conservation. The current non-mandatory system does not

work, and we need alternative energy sources such as switchgrass, which does not require as much water for processing as corn. He later mentioned he favored requiring utilities to incorporate alternative energy as one of their sources and that energy should be generated locally. He discussed the difficulty of finding compact fluorescent lights and the importance of encouraging this method of saving energy, going on to say that automobile fuel efficiency standards need to be raised. He opposed expansion of the Clinton nuclear power plant due to the danger of leaks and problems with spent fuel disposal.

Rex Bradfield evoked his background in engineering and land surveying, stressing that decisions on environmental matters must be based on the understanding that damage to the environment can be very costly and sometimes irreversible. Therefore, bills related to the environment must be comprehensive and very detailed to prevent both infringement and undue litigation. In answer to a question on global warming, he stated that alternative fuel sources such as wind and solar need to be explored in addition to newer-technology nuclear reactors, which should be installed if they can meet rigorous safety standards. On a question about the advisability of local control of groundwater, he stressed that laws on drainage are woefully inadequate and that comprehensive legislation on drainage districts is needed. On transit, he said that he'd love to see rail lines (e.g., between Urbana and Danville) reestablished and called for greater support of Amtrak. On sprawl, he believes urban growth is occurring at an alarming rate, blighted areas should be redeveloped, and more high-rise buildings should be encouraged. On ATVs (all-terrain vehicles), his view was they should be kept out of state parks with the exception of handicapped people who need them in order to enjoy the outdoors.

Naomi Jakobsson (whose reelection bid was successful) was the only incumbent on the panel and so tended to focus on her accomplishments as state representative during the past four years. She mentioned her membership in environmental organizations and sponsorship of various environment-related

bills in the State House, including those for reducing mercury use (Illinois has the fourth-highest mercury level in the nation; see related article), for encouraging alternative fuel development and green building, and for awarding \$12 million for new rail routes. She proposed the expansion of green standards for state-funded buildings and increased funding for public transportation, especially Amtrak (ridership has risen 48% since 2003) along with Champaign-Urbana's MTD bus system. She voiced deep concern about our aquifers and recently sponsored an aquifer study act; in her view, alternative fuels should be explored but not at the expense of depleting our water supplies. She favors smart growth and opposes the Clinton nuclear plant expansion without strenuous safeguards, noting recent shutdowns. On green spaces, she stated she helped local governments obtain OSLAD and NAFTA funds and sponsored a bill to give the Urbana Park District \$45,000 in additional funding.

Mike Frerichs (successful in his election bid) stressed in his opening statement that energy is the biggest issue we face and that we'll need a variety of energy sources including clean coal, wind, solar, and renewable biofuels to meet future needs. Frerichs advocated UIUC as a "green" campus, the lowering of mercury emissions by 90%, study and conservation of the Mahomet aquifer, and preservation of open space for recreational and agricultural use. On water issues, we need to fully fund the aquifer study, offer greater support to the State Geological and Water Surveys, and stop raiding the state water permit fee fund. Also, he felt that MTD support should be increased and high-speed rail should be funded, especially between Champaign and Chicago. On green space, he supported buying land early to avoid inflated prices, opposed raids on open space acquisition funds, supported encouraging landowners to open up land for recreational use under the proviso that they are not responsible for accidents on their property. He opposed ATVs in state parks.

Joe Parnarauskis expressed the view that drastic change is needed to provide more rational distribution of resources, the wealthy have had pri-

mary control of resources for too long, and in general money has not been focused in the right direction. On global warming, he advocated pumping money into mass transit, especially for commuting purposes. Fossil fuel companies should be taxed to support alternative energy. Tax breaks should be provided to individuals and businesses proposing energy efficiency improvements. He called for state funding for both groundwater and surface water studies, and for solutions to be applied uniformly to all Illinois communities. He favored electric intercity trams, nuclear plant expansion with adequate safeguards, statewide urban planning, and specialty areas for ATVs while opposing their use in state parks.

David Gill was the only national candidate present at the meeting, and this was his second attempt to unseat his opponent, Rep. Johnson. Gill began by saying he didn't generally

believe in one-issue campaigns (he's had a longstanding interest in health issues), but this year the environment was the key issue. He stated his concern with global warming and its ramifications. In response to a global warming and sustainable energy question, he responded that because the most recent federal energy bill gave billions of dollars in subsidies to fossil fuel companies, which he attributed to their vast campaign contributions, America desperately needs federal campaign finance reform. Instead of subsidizing fossil fuel companies, we need to subsidize wind farms and sign on to the Kyoto Treaty. We need to subsidize development of the 100 m.p.g. car. In addition, he opposed efforts to weaken the Endangered Species Act and supported the use of law enforcement to keep ATVs out of national forests, including Shawnee.

Heather Stevenson read Rep.

Johnson's statement, in which he described opposing drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; voting against a modified Endangered Species Act; blocking the cancellation of several environmental programs; supporting Amtrak; voting against bills that subsidize loggers at taxpayers' expense, and supporting valuable scientific research. He mentioned it took courage to make unpopular decisions in support of the environment.

Though the election is over, it was interesting to review this forum. I found it refreshing that for the most part all candidates were progressive in their ideas, although we know things can change when those elected must face the cold reality of political compromise. In doing this review, I had the benefit of a recording of the forum I acquired from Chris Foster at the Urbana City Council Chambers. The recording can be obtained upon request, for a small fee.

Reduced Mercury Pollution in Illinois: Rebutting A Few Myths

There's more than mercury pollution spewing from the coal-fired power generation industry. Out-of-state owners of Illinois coal plants will say just about anything to avoid making the relatively small investment necessary to reduce the levels of mercury coming from those plants.

As the Illinois Pollution Control Board takes up a proposal requiring coal plants to reduce mercury pollution by 90%, it's time to end the myths.

Myth: The rule is too expensive to implement and will result in power plant closures and job loss in Illinois.
Fact: The estimated cost of complying with the mercury rule is less than one percent of utility revenues. At that relatively low cost, the rule is unlikely to affect power plant or coal mining jobs in Illinois.

Myth: Requiring coal plants to install mercury pollution controls will lead to larger electricity bills.

Fact: Arate impact is unlikely because of the competitive nature of the wholesale power market. Any effect on rates would be negligible. For instance, ComEd's 3.3 million residential customers might pay an additional 20 cents per month and Ameren's 1.25 million customers an extra \$1.20, about the price of a cup of coffee. The Illinois Commerce Commission could extend current rate caps, precluding any impact of mercury pollution controls on electrical rates.

Myth: Reducing mercury pollution in the U.S. won't make a difference because the rest of the world also releases mercury pollution.

Fact: Local pollution matters more than global pollution. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration found that approximately 48% of mercury deposited in Lake Michigan came from sources within 60 miles. In a different study, U.S. EPA scientists found that in the Chicago area — one of the nation's worst mercury hot spots — nearly two-thirds of the mercury deposited came from Illinois sources.

Myth: Mercury pollution from power plants is decreasing without mercury emission regulations.

Fact: It is increasing each year as plants burn more coal to meet increasing electricity demand. A Chicago Tribune analysis of U.S. EPA data found that Illinois coal plants released more mercury in 2004 than the year before and that airborne mercury in Illinois increased by 28 percent

between 1999 and 2002.

Myth: Illinois' fish consumption advisories are based on too few samples to be an accurate indicator of the danger of eating fish.

Fact: Illinois' fish consumption advisories for methyl mercury are based on the best available data and follow the same procedures used by other Great Lake states. All data indicates that the average Illinois predator fish (most of which are popular sport fishing species) contains unsafe levels of mercury.

Myth: Most people eat ocean fish, not Illinois fish; it doesn't matter how much mercury Illinois fish contain.

Fact: There are about 700,000 recreational fishermen in Illinois and studies show that the average angler eats far more than the safe number of fish.

Editor's note: Reprinted with permission from the Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Get More Involved! Join the Prairie Group Listserv

If you want to keep up with the latest opportunities to get involved on behalf of the environment, sign up for our listserv (group e-mail system) by going to <http://lists.sierraclub.org/archives> and scroll down past many Sierra Club listservs to click on "IL-PRAIRIE-ALERTS."

On the next screen, click on "Join or leave the list" then fill in blanks for "Your e-mail address" and "Your name." Then select the listserv settings you want (the default should be fine for beginners) and click on the "Join the list" button. You should get an e-mail response to finish confirming your listserv subscription.

If you have problems signing up, send an e-mail to Jim Beauchamp at jwbeauch@uiuc.edu.

have been tested. Interim results released in February of this year indicated that one in five women of childbearing age had mercury levels above that recommended by EPA (one microgram of mercury per gram of hair). One in five. By thinking just of our mothers, sisters, and friends, we all probably know several women who may be at risk from high levels of mercury. That's not good.

The good news is that the body can eliminate mercury over time, which is why it is detectable in hair (and why the hair sample must be taken near the root — to get a measurement that indicates current levels). Should anyone have mercury levels that exceed the EPA's recommended limit, time and a change of diet will bring it back down to safer levels. Finding out your mercury level will let you know if you need to take any precautions or if you're not at risk.

Mercury contamination primarily follows a well-established cycle: mercury is released into the air from smokestacks; it falls to the ground with rain, and ends up in lakes, rivers, and streams. Bacteria then convert the mercury to a more toxic compound called

methyl-mercury. Little fish consume the bacteria containing methyl-mercury, bigger fish eat the little fish, and we eat the bigger fish. By 2003, 45 states and U.S. territories had fish advisories for local waterways, suggesting that people — again, particularly women of childbearing age — limit their fish consumption, frequently to just one meal per month. For more information, the U.S. Geological Survey has an excellent fact sheet at www.usgs.gov/themes/factsheet/146-00/.

As with many other environmental issues, the Bush administration has not required the coal industry to use the best available technologies that would greatly reduce the amount of mercury emissions, even as the national energy "policy" calls for building scores more coal-fired power plants — 14 of them right here in Illinois. (If you are interested in a thorough background regarding the weak national Mercury Rule, please see www.sierraclub.org/mercury/factsheets/2006-07_background.pdf.)

Just as with global warming, with no leadership coming out of Washington D.C., states are taking the lead in forcing power

plants to reduce their mercury emissions, and Illinois is among them, seeking to reduce mercury emissions by 90 percent by 2009.

Reducing annual mercury emissions will take many years, and it will be many more before methyl-mercury levels in the environment abate and fish advisories are lifted. Until then, we all need to do what we can to protect ourselves and our families. Knowing our own mercury levels is an important first step. We hope you think so, too, and will join us to get your hair tested at the Timothy John Salon, 404 W. Green Street, Urbana, on Saturday, February 17, between 8:30 and 10:30 a.m. Please call the salon to make an appointment — the entire process takes about ten minutes.

The Prairie Group would like to thank the Timothy John Salon for its assistance with this project. For more information, please contact Kirstin Replogle at 217.344.3809 or by e-mail at kirstinrep@mac.com.

Much of the information in this article (and a whole lot more!) can be found at www.sierraclub.org/mercury/overview.

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* elected or appointed to ExCom for 2005-2006

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Open Positions

Program Chair; Publicity Chair;

Webmaster; Fund Raising

Website: www.illinois.sierraclub.org/prairie

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