

ROB LAMME, based on his public talk on July 9, 2014 at the Coastal Federation's Wrightsville Beach headquarters and on a July 14, 2014 email to Glenn Blackburn. Rob is the Federation's lobbyist in Raleigh. He has been working around the state legislature since 1998, including stints as Director of Government Relations for the N. C. Department of Health and Human Services and budget director for the N. C. Senate. He is a long-time member and supporter of the Federation.

Rob pointed out that the North Carolina legislature has never really been pro-environment. Before 2010 the legislature was dominated by conservative Democrats, and they were not easy to deal with on environmental issues. Republicans have controlled the legislature since 2010, and the result has been a four-year assault on the environment and it is not over yet. Many hard-right Republicans are very pro-business and anti-environment. One of their goals is to reduce the amount of money the state government spends, so they look for ways to cut funding and that hurts agencies like the Clean Water Management Trust Fund.

But, Rob said, the Coastal Federation should be proud of the work it does in Raleigh. There is no other environmental organization in the state that is doing the whole package – policy, restoration, education – like the Federation does.

And, Rob noted, we are able to stop some things in Raleigh. One example is a recently proposed Senate bill what would greatly limit the public's ability to appeal air permits. That bill has been blocked for the time being. He pointed out that this bill is an example of a small, arcane change that could have caused some environmental damage. But dozens or even hundreds of small, arcane changes can accumulate and cause great harm to the coastal environment.

Another example occurred in 2013 when the national waste industry launched an assault on the Solid Waste Management Act. The N. C. Senate quickly passed a bill undermining the Act, but the bill slowed down in the House. The Federation fought the new bill, the governor eventually came to oppose it as well, and there was a major battle for several weeks. The bill undermining the Act was finally blocked.

Rob said that half the battle with Republican legislators is getting them to listen to environmental concerns, and some of them will respond on particular issues. Some coastal legislators will support oyster bed restoration that helps clean water. Some may support restoration projects that promise to create jobs. An environmental success story is the blocking of a proposal for the mid-Currituck bridge. The Republican blocked it for financial reasons, but that prevented a lot of ecological damage.

Rob made several other points about the legislature. One was that many legislators respond more positively to the concept of "conservation" than to the word "environment" or "environmentalist." Another was that many legislators from inland areas are not that interested in coastal issues and don't know much about them. They often defer to coastal legislators on coastal issues. Finally, when asked about the influence of ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council) on the legislature, he said that it

was “considerable.” ALEC has an impact, but not as much as some people think. Not all Republicans adhere to ALEC’s proposals.

Rob had some interesting comments on the climate change/global warming issue. He noted that in Republican circles today you cannot even acknowledge the reality of global warming. But he suspects that global warming and also the coal ash problem are about to become prominent issues in North Carolina politics. Many young people simply do not comprehend the Republican attitude on global warming. Rob believes that for the first time in a southern state there is a real chance that an environmental issue – global warming – will become a major issue separating the two parties. He thinks that the League of Conservation Voters will spend a lot of money to publicize the global warming issue in the 2014 Senate race. He said that he is “hopeful” about the politics on conservation issues. (Rob also noted that national polls show that “global warming” is a more meaningful phrase than “climate change” to the general public.)

In his July 14 email, Rob responded to a question derived from a CRO article of January 2, 2014 by Frank Tursi. Frank said that there is an inherent conflict between protecting our coastal environment and the remaking of our state government to be smaller, less reliant on rules and regulations, and more focused on jobs and economic development. Rob responded that he thinks Frank is “largely correct. It’s important to note, however, that to the degree that legislators are interested in making the regulatory process work better, there is common ground for us to find with them. Put another way, the NCCF is often a customer of DENR and the regulatory process. We go through that regulatory process when we do living shorelines, oyster bed work and wetland restoration; and much like other businesses that are regulated by DENR, we’ve found that the process can take too long, be too expensive, be inconsistent from one similar project to another, and put too much emphasis on small regulatory detail while missing the larger goal of conservation and effectiveness. Not always, but often. All of which is to say that we do not want to defend the state regulatory process as perfect; rather we don’t agree that weakening rules or starving the agencies that fund them is the way to make the process better.”

“Another place we find common ground with more conservative folks is in their skepticism about the state’s return on investment in economic development. We agree that a good deal of what the state has spent on economic development has been of questionable return. We’d like to see the state invest some of that funding in coastal restoration – wetlands, oyster beds, living shorelines – as a good deal of research shows that those kinds of investments have an immediate jobs payoff AND long term economic benefits to fisheries, etc.”

On another question about whether science has become “politicized” in recent years, Rob said: “I don’t think the issue is with scientists or science per se. I think it’s more about the long-time practice of politicians to agree with folks whose opinions concur with their own and disagree with those whose work does not. So with climate change, they are critical of the science including the USGS which says North Carolina is a sea level rise ‘hotspot.’ On fracking, though, many frack supporters quote the USGS reports regarding North Carolina’s natural gas deposits. Now there may be climate skeptics that attack science and scientists, but I don’t think it’s correct to say the politicians follow suit necessarily. I think

mostly the politicians are about as respectful of scientists as the general public, but disagree with them or agree when it suits them and their priorities.”