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Voluntary Environmental Programs: A Symposium

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Policy scholars, for at least a generation now, have addressed the usefulness of public-mandated "command and control" environmental regulations as an efficacious means to promote a cleaner environment In the United States, these policies go back at least as far as the Clean Air Act of the late 1960s and are quite often designed, evaluated, and generally shepherded under the auspices of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Given a series of mixed evaluations (for a recent review, see Coglianese & Nash, 2006; Prakash & Potoski, 2006) as to their overall effectiveness, the concept of a Voluntary Environmental Program (VEP) was posed as an alternative to the extensive governmental rules and regulations mandated by "command and control" legislation. In general terms, VEPs are self-regulation agreements that can be promoted by firms, governments, industry associations, and/or environmental groups to compel businesses to enhance their environmental protection performance (Steelman & Rivera, 2006).

The idea underlying the voluntary programs concept was consonant with a widespread changing, deregulatory philosophy of government, and was reflected in a number of policy issue-areas, e.g., communications and transportation. However, it was in the area of environmental regulation where Voluntary Programs were most noted, especially under the sponsorship of the EPA (see the Green Lights-later incorporated into Energy Star-and the 33/50 programs). Still, it is important to recognize that the emergence of VEPs was more than just a public policy, as various industries similarly established their own set of VEPs, often in cooperation with and assistance of a government agency; for instance, the American Chemical Council created the Responsible Care Program and the National Association of Ski Areas created a Sustainable Slopes Program (see King & Lenox, 2000; Rivera, deLeon, & Koebler, 2006, respectively). Scholars investigating the VEP phenomenon have observed that there are a number of reasons for firms or industry to adopt VEPs, like as a way of reaching out to consumers with a green signal (thus abetting their comparative differentiation advantage), as a way of obtaining new technologies and information, or as a way of avoiding later, possibly more constraining and invasive government-imposed regulations. VEP scholars, not surprisingly, soon offered a small but growing number of VEP-specific evaluations, finding (again not surprisingly) mixed results suggesting that some VEPs have been more effective than others in promoting enhanced corporate environmental performance. Yet, it is important to emphasize that for the most part, these initial empirical studies suggest that VEPs-lacking performance-based standards, independent monitoring, and sanctions-tend to attract "dirtier" firms that after participation do not appear to show higher environmental performance than non-VEP members (Steelman & Rivera, 2006).

With this background in mind, we approached the editors of the Policy Studies Journal, proposing a symposium, nominally on the topic of VEPs, but more specifically on VEPs as a policy instrument. It has long been observed that the environment has been viewed as a "public good." As articulated by Weimer and Vining (2005, p. 78), a "public good" is best characterized as both nonexcludable (none can be excluded from its benefits) and nonrivalrous (for one to consume a public good does not preclude another from also consuming it). As such, VEPs fall squarely into the category of initiatives promoting public goods; no one can be excluded from the benefits proffered by a cleaner environment and everybody can partake without fear of compromising other's benefits.

The problem, of course, is how to preserve, let alone enforce a "public good," as Garret Hardin (1968) cautioned us almost 40 years ago and where "outliers" abound (Olson, 1965). In terms of promoting a public good, a VEP is a consensual policy instrument between the government, the firm, and ultimately the consumer, one whose capacities are, by definition, voluntarily arrived at, that is, generally lacking in enforcement authority or powers as well as meaningful sanctions if the "good" is somehow violated or circumvented.

Thus, on this Symposium on Voluntary Environmental Programs, we asked the current community of VEP scholars whether a voluntary approach to the preservation of a public good is a reliable means for ensuring a level of environmental performance determined by a polity's public representatives. Or: What motivates a firm/industry to voluntarily undertake an environmental protection program? What are the factors that drive voluntary action? And, ultimately, is the VEP approach to environmental protection a continuingly viable policy tool, or should it be relegated to the dustbin of yesterday's policy fads? The responses to our solicitation have been especially gratifying, as is evident in the following articles.

The following articles begin to address these questions with great insight, sophistication, and sympathy. We present them here with little editorial comment. A subsequent issue of the Policy Studies Journal will present the second half of the symposium. At this later point in time, we will editorially interject ourselves and offer an integration of the individual articles as well as potential vectors for continuing VEPs research and derived policies. At this time, then, we briefly summarize the articles in the first half of the VEP symposium and insist that the Policy Studies Journal reader will be well rewarded by reading each of the four essays rather than simply accepting the following overviews.

Dinah A. Koehler is employed by the EPA's National Center for Environmental Research; as such, she can assume the role of "interested client" for the panoply of VEPs because many have been supported by the EPA. Her essay, "The Effectivenenss of Voluntary Environmental Programs-A Policy at a Crossroads?" presents a careful review of the VEP programs and their associated literatures, with special attention paid to the incentives for joining a VEP as well as their effectiveness. Acknowledging the recent VEP literature, she finds that their implementation has not directly been rewarded with evidence of pollution abatement She suggests a series of new explanatory variables that warrant scholarly attention, in particular, those dealing with the motivations of the participant firms rather than the more abstract quality (and benefit) of contributing to a public good. Koehler specifically argues that the contemporary VEPs are multifaceted, dealing with new product development and changing market conditions. In this light, she proposes casting a wider, more variegated net over VEP activities and subsequent evaluations.

Thomas Lyon and John Maxwell (of the **University of Michigan** and Indiana University, respectively) pose seven especially thoughtful "remarks" extracted from their extensive review of relevant literature in "Environmental Public Voluntary Programs Reconsidered." Like Koehler, they indicate that VEPs (in their terms, environmental "public voluntary programs," or PVPs) have had scant effect on the participants; where effects can be identified, they have been econometrically demonstrated as largely ineffective. Of special merit, then, is their argument that perhaps the conventional measures and methodologies are to blame, that is, the "information-oriented design of most PVPs means that econometric techniques commonly used... may not actually identify the effects of these programs." As such, they strongly suggest that the PVPs are worthwhile largely in terms of "information diffusion" mechanisms. They continue and offer a number of policy-oriented discussion points (or "remarks"), such as the imposition of an environmental tax in lieu of a PVP, how a PVP might increase political resistance to such a tax, or the relative value of technical information to early versus late adopters.

Madhu Khanna of the University of Illinois, and Patricia Koss, Cody Jones, and David Ervin of Portland State University address firms' "Motivations for Voluntary Environmental Management" The authors take notice of the relatively limited number of firms examined for their VEP participation, especially those we might characterize as middle- and smaller-sized firms. They expand this greatly using a number of Oregon companies as they adopt a variety of VEPs and Environmental Management Practices (EMPs). Interestingly enough, they find that VEPs and EMPs are not always consistent with one another, that different explanatory variables are more likely to motivate one strategy and less likely to encourage another; for instance, the presence of an R&D department in a firm is more likely to predict its participation in an EMP and less likely to predict its adoption of a VEP. Of equal interest is that sometimes the explanatory variables seem to coincide; e.g., pressures from consumers of the end product and/or investors in publicly traded companies were not seen to effect a firm's participation in either VEPs or EMPs.

Finally, Aseem Prakash and Matthew Potoski (of the University of Washington and Iowa State University, respectively) develop a theoretical model to explain the logic underlying the relationship between voluntary program design and program effectiveness to promote environmental protection. This model promises to facilitate future comparative research seeking to evaluate how VEPs efficacy is affected by the characteristics of their sponsors and participants as well as by their institutional context

As all of these authors note, VEPs (and the associated EMPs and PVPs) continue as important policy instruments. However, there is ample evidence that additional research epistemologies would be most useful in terms of both generalizations and specific policy implications. Still left hanging, of course, is the overarching question regarding the efficacy of VEPs as an example of public goods.

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