

Senator Gaylord Nelson
404 Old Senate Office Building

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NEW HAVEN, CONN. -- Senator Gaylord Nelson Wednesday called for the creation of a Community Environment Service to create jobs for the poor and greatly boost efforts to restore the livability of our decaying cities.

"Instead of an afterthought, the ghetto and the depressed rural area must be the front line in the battle to save our environment and protect the quality of human life," Nelson told a Yale University lecture series and environmental teach-in in the keynote address.

"And the productive energies of unemployed and underemployed Americans should be used to reshape their own lives and own communities," he said.

Nelson, chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Manpower and Poverty, said he will introduce legislation shortly to establish the Community Environment Service, "providing for a substantial new program of federally-subsidized jobs with a heavy emphasis on restoring the urban environment."

The Wisconsin Democrat said jobs under the proposed legislation would include such things as the design and restoration of housing and neighborhoods, environmental health aides in community health and water and air pollution programs, and the planning and construction of parks and recreation areas in inner cities.

"This would not be merely a cleanup, fix up campaign," he said. "This legislation would provide jobs to create livable city neighborhoods, decent housing, usable recreation facilities with the energies and talent of the people who reside there," Nelson continued.

"Make no mistake," he said, "any national policy on the environment that is worth its name must mean attacking the problems of our cities and the poor as much as it means providing national parks and scenic rivers."

Nelson pointed out, however, that the poor "often see the growing national concern for the environmental crisis as another scheme designed to turn the direction of the nation away from the hard realities of poverty, racial conflict and income redistribution."

"For the poor, their children's hunger and the burden of seeking work without finding it--or finding only jobs that pay too little to support a family--

are of overriding concern.

"Yet these are the very Americans who live either in the worst conceivable environment--the concrete desert of the big city slum, or in rural areas where there is potential for environment-connected work."

"Rats, noisy truck routes, filthy urban rivers, city airports shrouded in jet exhaust, highways tearing up neighborhoods and eliminating parks, even the design of public housing are among the most critical of our environmental issues," Nelson said.

Nelson recalled the observation of a visitor to one of our crowded cities who said, "I've seen the future and it won't work." Nelson said, "If our cities don't work, America won't work."

He called the American city "the crucible of the survival test of Man. If in our national drive for bigness and abundance we continue to flood our urban areas with garbage, pollution and automobiles, instead of measuring success by the improvement in the quality of human life, there is little hope for a livable America," Nelson said. "More than a question of aesthetics, the environmental issue has become a struggle for health, well-being and human decency.

"And there is no way to avoid dealing with this challenge," he continued. Now, he said, 70 per cent of Americans live in urban areas.

Nelson is on a 17-stop, national speaking tour proposing an agenda for nationwide environmental action. The Yale seminar, sponsored by the Yale School of Forestry, is entitled, "Issues on the Environmental Crisis." Former Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall is a visiting professor at the university and heads the lecture series. Nelson's address was combined with the university's environmental teach-in.

Funds under the job-creating program of the Community Environment Service, Nelson said, would be channeled through state, county, and municipal governmental units to enable them to hire people from the communities which they serve. Local non-profit and community action agencies would also be eligible for funds.

Beside the major job creation program, the legislation Nelson plans to

introduce would provide funding for local Community Environment Service groups to provide a focus for community planning and volunteer activity in environmental planning and action campaigns.

"Community people must be involved in planning as well as working in these community environmental programs. Planning could be done through community agencies, model cities agencies, or new groups representing the poor," he said.

Nelson said the legislation will be based on the successful model of "Operation Mainstream," authored by the Wisconsin Senator in 1964. In the Mainstream projects, elderly rural workers now carry on community conservation and construction work. But the Mainstream legislation, while originally drafted to include urban and rural areas and workers of all ages, has been administered as a small pilot program currently budgeted at the \$41 million level.

For the Environment Service, Nelson said rural job assistance might also be provided, although the emphasis should be in urban areas. In the rural areas, he added, the program could include construction and development of county and Federal parks, recreation areas, roadside and community recreation facilities, as well as rural health and pollution projects.

In commenting on the April environmental activities nationwide, Nelson said the April 22 Earth Day program would see the participation of some 2,000 universities, more than 7,000 high schools, and many communities and hundreds of thousands of Americans.

Earth Day, Nelson said, "is a dramatic step toward a widespread public concern and insistence on action to meet our environmental problems." The next step, he said, must be the formation of environmental action groups in every community in the country for a sustained effort to work toward specific goals for a better environment and for establishing quality on a par with quantity as an aim of American life.

Nelson proposed the April 22 teach-ins in a speech last September 20 to the Washington Environmental Council in Seattle, Wash.

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