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It's time to Act on the Environment -
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No Excuses: It's Time to Act for the Environment

White Plains, New York

January 24, 2000

Thank you very much, I am just delighted to be here and I am so happy to be here with Nita Lowey who has been such a leader on the environment. We also have to be careful that we are not undercut in the environmental scene the way that the Supreme Court has tended to be here in Washington and in Congress. It could be good on many fronts, but particularly it will be good for the environment. And I actually want to thank Eliot Spitzer for his work in fighting power plants, which I think all of us will remember.

But particularly, I want to thank him for linking the concerns of those of us in this room to the state of leadership, he is our environmental Attorney General. All of these issues have to be what I call, "kitchen table" issues. The environment is in need of championing but also keep moving forward and that is one of the reasons why I want to be in the Senate, because I think the environment is one of the critical issues of the 21st century. And I would like to be there to pick up the work that Senator Monyihan had started and to work with Nita and others who care about these issues.

For me, there are obviously the personal experiences that we all share of loving the outdoors and marveling at the great state and national parks that we've conserved over the years of looking at what is happening even nearby as we've watched the pressure that is occurring because of sprawl on wetlands and woodlands and meadows and others of nature's bounty that are still left.

As an advocate and a lawyer and as a mother and the First Lady I have been focused for more than 30 years on the well-being of children and I am more and more convinced that one of the issues that every mother and father has to be concerned about and that society in general has to be concerned about is what our children are breathing and drinking and eating. Now maybe we needed to be concerned about that 30 and 40 years ago when I was growing up but we didn't know to be concerned about it. We can look back at a lot of the environmental disasters that occurred because of unregulated dumping. Because I remember the days in the

summer of running behind the mosquito trucks that were spraying.

We thought that was great fun and nobody knew any better. Well now we have no excuses; we do know better. And we cannot permit our children to be at risk. And so the environment is not any longer just a matter of what we appreciate. It is a very vital personal health concern that all of us should be paying attention to.

I appreciated very much what was said about how children are not just miniature adults. They roll around on the ground more, they run outside more, and take great gulps of the air. They are much more at risk of whatever is in our atmosphere than adults in general are. Today I know that New York is facing some very serious environmental challenges most of which have already been mentioned, and many of which are being addressed at the county, and state and federal level because of the leadership of people like all of you in this room.

But when we think about air pollution to ozone smog to acid rain to dying lakes and rivers to disappearing lobsters we know that something is happening. More than three-fourths of New Yorkers live in areas that do not meet the National Ambiance Air Quality Standards. The New York metropolitan area, including Westchester, has some of the highest levels of ozone pollution in the country. So as Andy said in the beginning we need all the advocates we can get for every drop of rain and every tree and every blade of grass and every reservoir in every way we can to bring to public attention these facts.

In our schools in our hospital emergency rooms in our doctor's offices we are already seeing the effects on the elderly and children of a lot of the pollution that these statistics in a sort of broad, bland way tell us about-but have to be lived to really experience. We can see for those who love the Adirondacks how the steady fall of acid rain has eroded and even killed our lakes and parts of our forest. Think of the place names. If you look at the map--I have been studying the map a lot-- and as you look at the map there are some of the most wonderful names, some Indian names and other names that are really evocative of what people first thought and what they experienced.

So there are places like Loon Hollow Pond, but there aren't any loons left because the only fish that can survive are crawfish. There has been many a year that there aren't any trout--which happens to be the New York state fish--were caught. You know, so just think that stories and visual reminders like this really call upon all of us to demand action from every level of government.

And over the past 25 years we have seen proof about what government can do. You know I sometimes find myself explaining and defending the role of government. I don't know if any of you find that as well. And I think of a long list of reasons about why the government is important to the person I am speaking with. Oftentimes if I talk about a specific program like the Family Medical Leave Act, or Social Security or Medicare or whatever it might be but I increasingly find myself talking about the environment and talking about laws like the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act which have really cleared up our skies and our waterways but we have to do more.

First and foremost we must do more to clear our skies of ozone smog and reduce acid rain. My top environmental legislative priority in the Senate would be to work with Nita and other like-minded legislators on both sides of the aisle to pass the Acid Deposition and Ozone Control Act. But bringing things more down to earth would be the Acid Rain Reduction Act. Senator Monyihan, Congressman Lowey, and other people introduced it in 1998 but it hasn't been able to move because there are a lot of forces that are against doing anything which would move us forward on the air pollution front.

But we have to be committed and vigilant and work very hard on this and it would certainly be my top priority. We know that as the Attorney General's lawsuit clearly points out, the emissions of power plants located in states hundreds of miles away are undermining the quality of our air. This bill would force these plants into line by placing a cap on nationwide emissions dramatically reducing nitrogen oxide and cutting sulfur dioxide by half. Now when the Clean Air Act was originally passed the state of science was such that people didn't think nitrogen oxide was as big a problem.

Well we now know it is. So again we have no excuse. It is time for us to act. And the way we would do this is to build on

what we know would work--allowing plants to trade pollution rights with one another. The 1990 Clean Air Act Amendment showed us this method of matching market principles to environment protection can be very successful. And because of this policy, sulfur dioxide emission has already fallen by 25% in parts of the eastern United States. But Senator Moynihan's bill will take us many steps closer to providing cleaner air for our children and making sure that we try to bring back the meaning of some of those names of those beautiful places in the Adirondacks.

We also know that one of the best ways to reduce pollution is to persuade more of our fellow citizens to leave some of their cars in their garages and get on the bus or the subway or the train to go to work. Now last year, New Yorkers represented roughly one-third of the nation's transit riders, yet we received just 16% of federal transit dollars. That simply is not fair. And as a Senator, I will work very hard to make sure New York gets its fair share of federal mass transit funds and to increase the amount of money that goes to transit funds.

I will also work with Senator Schumer and Representative Lowey and others the entire New York delegation across party lines to secure the federal funds we need to clean up our river ways and our waterways from the Hudson to the Finger Lakes to the Long Island Sound. But looking even further into the future, we have to encourage more research in cleaner technology that can reduce pollution. Investing in this research not only makes good environmental sense, it makes economic sense for the state of New York.

I know that much of the groundbreaking research in fuel cells that can make cars, refrigerators, and other appliances more energy efficient is taking place right here in New York. I also visited a plant in Binghamton that is using natural gas buses. I know that there is train technology being developed in Cornell where I've also visited that could make a big difference.

So this is a win-win decision for New York-to clean up the environment by investing in the economic opportunities that will put New Yorkers to work and produce products that can be exported from New York to the rest of the country and the world. So I will do everything I can to make sure that New York is on the cutting edge of cleaner technology, research and commercial development.

And finally, as a Senator I would work to help all New Yorkers and Americans recognize that protecting our environment is not just a local or even national challenge but it is a global one. That's what I mean about making it a kitchen-table issue. In fact, much of the education about the environment that's happening around kitchen tables in New York and elsewhere is happening around kitchen tables because children come home from school and talk to their parents and their grandparents about environmental issues. And though it may not seem likely here in the middle of January we know that global warming is one of the most serious challenges facing all nations in the 21st century. That is why I will vote to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and to support efforts to bring all nations together to protect and respect our shared environment.

I want to work with all of you to make it as clear as we can, as clear as Stuart's balloon example was, what's at stake and what we can do about these issues. It may seem very far away to think about flaring gas in China or about the destruction of the rain forests in Brazil, but those, too, affect the quality of our life here in Westchester County. And closer to home, it may be that if you don't eat lobster, that you can get it somewhere else, what's happening in the Long Island Sound may not be a big concern or the fact that the Adirondacks is still seeing so much acid rain. But on these and on every other environmental issue, we know that what is happening to our air and our water will affect the quality of our lives and particularly will affect the quality of our children's lives.

So I think we all have a responsibility to do everything we can to help preserve and protect our natural resources and I would like very much to do what I could in the Senate to make that a reality. Thank you, very much.