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An Interview with Congresswoman Hilda L. Solis

By Pamela Flick, California Wild Heritage Campaign (CWHC)

CWHC What issues or experiences first got you interested in protecting the environment?

Solis My Dad used to take my family up into the mountains. We loved the outdoors and really learned to appreciate all the partnership that we had with the environment. Our health is dependant on a well environment.

CWHC What are the major environmental challenges facing Latinos, especially in California?

Solis There are so many pressing environmental issues facing the Latino community and other minority communities throughout the United States. I think that the most pressing issue in California right now is water. Because of the arid nature of our state and the widespread pollution, we have challenges with water quality, water supply or water needed for environmental restoration.

In my community, which is more than 60% Latino, we are dealing with widespread perchlorate contamination. Perchlorate was manufactured in my district during World War II as an additive to jet fuel. Of course, environmental laws were not in place at that time so chemicals were literally dumped into the San Gabriel River. Today, we are trying to clean up the watershed, which is one of the dirtiest in the nation. As a result of water contamination, many wells have been shut down and our water providers have been forced to look for water from other places.

I wish that I could say that this is an unusual problem but perchlorate contamination and contamination from other chemicals is widespread in California. Unfortunately, this contamination seems to be more prevalent in Latino and other minority communities.

In addition, we are facing challenges with air pollution. Despite having the toughest air laws in the nation, California has many urban centers, like Los Angeles, that still do not meet clean air standards. As a result, Latinos who are more likely to live in an urban area, have more asthma and other respiratory problems than other communities.

We need to get active as a community to seek more federal funds for cleanup of our environment, we need to hold polluters responsible for cleaning up their messes and we



must continue to fight to keep polluters out of our back yards.

CWHC According to recent polls, Latino support for Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers is very strong at 81%, supporting protection of our wild places more strongly than any other demographic. What do you believe connects the Latino community to our wild lands and rivers?

Solis Our families come together in nature. Whether it is picnics or camping or just playing by a river, Latino families value our natural resources because we use our natural resources. Since many Latino families cannot afford to go on really expensive vacations, often times, they vacation using public lands for day trips or camping trips. I can remember swimming in the River when I was younger with my parents and sisters. Those kinds of memories have stuck with me and I believe that is the case with many Latinos.

CWHC Why are wilderness and wild rivers important to you personally?

Solis Wilderness areas and wild rivers helped shape my youth and my goals as a public servant. From the time that I was little, I was taught the value of the environment to our health. Those lessons have stuck with me and keep me motivated to do what I do as a public citizen and a Member of Congress.

I am also concerned that these important places are disappearing. With the population expected to double in Los Angeles during the next 10 years, it is time that we make sure that our remaining pristine areas are protected for future generations.

CWHC Is there a wild river or wilderness area that is especially important to you?

Solis I am particularly interested in the areas of my bill that would protect the Silver Mountains, the East Fork, Mount Baldy and the Sheep Mountains in the Angeles National Forest. I think that these areas are special because they are so close to Los Angeles and will give people in my urban community, who would not have the opportunity to visit wilderness, the chance to enjoy these pristine areas.

CWHC You are the first-ever Latina in Congress to sponsor and champion Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers legislation. Do you expect this movement to continue, specifically with other Latino Members of Congress?

Solis I certainly hope so! The environment is a very important part of our health and has other broad implications to everything from the economy to the food that we eat. I think this is especially true in Latino communities, where we suffer from health disparities as a result of increased pollution. Our kids are taught from a young age to recycle and to value the world around them. I think that those lessons will stick with our children and help to develop our next generation of leadership.

You can already see more and more Latino Members of Congress getting involved in the Committees that deal with the environment. In the last Congress, there were only 4 Latinos on the Resources Committee and none on the Energy and Commerce Committee. In this Congress, we have doubled that number on Resources and I am honored to be the first Latino Member of the Energy and Commerce Committee. More Latino Members are getting involved and I think that you will see more and more leadership on this issue in the future.

CWHC In addition to Wilderness and Wild Rivers, what other environmental issues interest you?

Solis I grew up near the largest landfill west of the Mississippi River. So, pollution issues, especially those issues dealing with environmental justice have always been at the heart of my advocacy. Everyone should be able to breathe clean air and drink clean water and enjoy green space. Unfortunately, this is not the case in most minority and poor communities. That is why it is necessary for people to join together to fight environmental injustices.

CWHC What would you suggest to people wanting to help protect the wild places in your bill? What can they do to preserve the lands and rivers they care about?

Solis I would suggest that you write your Member of Congress, the President and let your local officials know that you support this important piece of legislation. By communicating your priorities to your Representatives, you are helping to shape their priorities. Hopefully, this will translate into more support for the bill and for our wild places nationwide.

CWHC Who are some of the leaders that have inspired you to do the work you are doing?

Solis There are so many people who have inspired me. First and foremost, my parents have served as an example to me. They have taught me to persevere and to help others. Others, like Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta, the cofounders of the United Farm Workers, have been an example to me that you can overcome anything with teamwork and communication. And finally, my professor, Mr. Bob Sanchez, inspired me to go on and get a college education. He taught me to encourage others to be their very best.

CWHC With the Wilderness Act passing in 1964, the California statewide Wilderness bill in 1984, and the California Desert Protection Act passing in 1994, any thought on what 2004 will bring?

Solis I think that 2004 is going to bring about opportunities for a lot of hard work by those, like ourselves, who value our natural resources. We are in a very different situation than we were in other years with an environmentally unfriendly Administration and even unfriendlier Republican Congressional leadership. Unfortunately, it isn't up to the Democrats if this bill is considered but we will continue to work towards getting this bill heard. I look forward to working with other environmentalists to get this accomplished.

It is important for all of us to get involved, despite the color of our skin or a socioeconomic status. The environment is one of those issues that transcend racial and economic boundaries. We all need a strong environment in order to be a healthy nation and a healthy world.



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