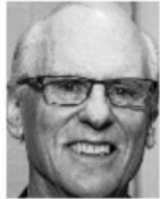


Overreach and oversight

Gov. Pete Ricketts says he is concerned about “government overreach.” One need only witness the St. Francis Ministries child welfare contract to realize that government oversight (not overreach) is necessary. St. Francis has put vulnerable children at risk by not fulfilling their contractual obligations.

Let’s look at what happens when bad corporate practices are called out. The Tobacco Master Settlement served as compensa-



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tion for taxpayer money that had been spent in connection with tobacco-related diseases.

In Nebraska, the settlement assured that all counties in Nebraska would be served by a local public health department. Prior to this time, only 22 counties of 93 had health department coverage. Until that time, Nebraska was consistently at the bottom of the list of states in terms of public health spending. As bad as the COVID-19 pandemic is, imagine what it would have been without the public health infrastructure that resulted from this landmark settlement.

Another settlement involved the Volkswagen scandal. VW was cheating about their harmful emissions from a half million of their diesel cars. Although this settlement wasn’t nearly as large as the tobacco settlement, it has still helped to fund cleaner transportation and electric vehicle charging stations throughout the state. This was the result of calling out corporate cheaters and taking actions to make our air less polluted.

Blaming the Texas energy crisis on renewable energy and “radical environmentalists,” as Ricketts did, is disingenuous. Texas chose to go it alone in part

to avoid federal regulations. Despite warnings, Texas chose not to be prepared for cold weather. Electricity customers paid with their lives, their property and their hard-earned money. Now Texans are asking: Where was the governmental oversight?

Who are the “radical environmentalists” that the governor is concerned about when he reacted to the energy demands during our recent frigid weather? Here’s a few: The Medical Society Consortium on Climate & Health represents over 30 medical organizations such as the American Medical Association and affiliates like the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society. They support a decreased the use of fossil fuels, an increase in energy efficiency and the use of clean energy sources. The Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change “concluded that addressing climate change is the greatest public health opportunity of the 21st century.”

The U.S. Department of Defense’s Report on Effects of a Changing Climate to the Department of Defense highlights threats to national security related to climate change. An article in DefenseNews about threats to military bases featured a photo of the catastrophic flooding at Offutt Air Force Base in 2019.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce issued a statement about climate change saying: “We have long emphasized that combating climate change will require citizens, government, and business to work together.” They went on to say: “Inaction is not an option.”

RepublicEn is a group that calls themselves the “eco-right.” Although they support free-market solutions, they say: “There are three ways to fix climate change: regulate emissions; incentivize new technology; or price the negative effects of burning fossil fuels.” Those

solutions will likely require government action.

The richest and most powerful companies and people who contribute the most to the climate crisis are the least likely to suffer the consequences. That’s one reason why the American Public Health Association’s Center for Climate, Health and Equity (where I serve on their advisory board) was formed. Climate, health and equity are inter-related.

The AltEn situation in Mead needs to address the interrelationships mentioned above. The AltEn situation has the potential of being Nebraska’s version of Flint, Michigan. AltEn’s ethanol plant uses seed grains covered with insecticides and fungicides to produce their product.

This plant, which recently spilled 4 million gallons of manure and stillage, likely contaminated with pesticides, needs constant monitoring of air, soil and water. It doesn’t help that under the governor’s administration that the Department of Environmental Quality and the Nebraska State Energy Office were merged into the Department of Environment and Energy. (The same department should not be in charge of promoting energy such as ethanol while at the same time policing the environmental impacts of plants like AltEn.)

Even when the people of Nebraska voted to let the governor know that they wanted to expand Medicaid (health and equity issues), it was more than two years before it was implemented, depriving thousands of Nebraskans of needed healthcare for years. That time lag is what I call government under-reach.

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