

Ryan Alexander, President
Taxpayers for Common Sense
&
Erich Pica, President
Friends of the Earth

On Thursday, November 17, Ryan Alexander and Erich Pica joined 10 Rachel's Network and Rachel's Action Network members to share recommendations from the recently released [Green Scissors 2011](#) report. Ryan opened the call with an introduction to Taxpayers for Common Sense (TCS) and its origins, and Erich continued with an introduction to Friends of the Earth (FOE). The Green Scissors campaign began in 1994, when the "Contract with America" was popularized, as a way to engage fiscal conservatives on environmental issues.

Ryan noted that Green Scissors is a core part of TCS's work; TCS was founded by a former FOE staff member in 1995. The latest report represents a true partnership among the four sponsoring organizations – TCS, FOE, Public Citizen, and the Heartland Institute – as each organization completely supports everything in the report. The support of the conservative Heartland Institute is especially important in today's polarized environment.

Erich agreed, stating that this year's report was one of the biggest, and among other important elements, recommends eliminating all fossil fuel subsidies. On a positive note, Erich noted that he is finally starting to see movement in Congress on oil and gas subsidies. Additionally, the report recommends \$50 billion in cuts to nuclear subsidies and takes a fresh look at biofuels. A newer section on alternative energy makes the case that science shows that the policy is not going in the right direction. The report also goes after \$56 billion in agriculture subsidies. Altogether, Green Scissors recommends \$380 billion in cuts, which is roughly one quarter of the Super Committee's mandate, \$1.2 trillion.

Erich and Ryan both highlighted the importance of evaluating all kinds of bad spending, including insurance, subsidies, liability caps, and financing mechanisms. Caps are especially misleading, but they ultimately encourage irresponsibility in the marketplace. Guaranteed agricultural payments also incentivize irresponsible behavior, when a farmer might choose to put an otherwise piece of unworkable land into production because of the promise of payments.

In response to the question of what one area would provide the most environmental benefit and cost savings, Ryan said fossil fuel subsidies represent the largest portion of subsidies and would be easiest to cut as a group. Erich's opinion was that cutting agriculture subsidies, including tax breaks for biofuels, would provide three times the benefit in the form of environmental savings, food security savings, and deficit savings. He highlighted FOE's efforts to work with conservative Senators James Inhofe and Tom Coburn to cut ethanol subsidies as evidence of the strategy's wide appeal. Last year, the Senate's vote to repeal corn ethanol subsidies was a major victory.

In terms of lobbying the Congressional Super Committee, TCS has been coordinating field events all over the country, bringing together local groups with diverse viewpoints, to build support for the Green Scissors recommendations. They have also met with 10 of the 12 offices represented on the Super Committee and met with committee leaders. Additionally, the coalition has conducted briefings on the Hill and met with editorial boards at newspapers across the country. The Super Committee thus far has been very opaque, and has made no efforts at transparency. During one lobbying meeting, one Member of Congress on the Agriculture Committee shared his frustration, noting that the Agriculture Committee leadership had drafted a proposal and sent it on to the Super Committee without ever receiving input from the rest of the committee. Ryan predicted that we would see limited progress from the Super Committee, but that the reform of accounting practices used by oil companies on U.S. tax returns and some agriculture subsidies would likely be included.

Erich drew attention to some Republicans challenging the Grover Norquist anti-tax pledge, especially on tax breaks to industry, and credited the fight over biofuels for opening the door to this debate. Ryan agreed, and added that budget debates will be around for a while, so don't expect this conversation to end any time soon.

For members interested in advocating on behalf of Green Scissors, or against subsidies in general, Ryan offered to travel to brief a group on the issue, and also recommended calling your Member of Congress and asking for their support. Erich added that supporting the recommendations in the report is just smart politics; they are easy things to do for the environment and the deficit. The report has become more well-known in environmental circles and on the Hill, but help spreading the word is always beneficial. Ryan added that they are also interested in hearing new ideas to include in the next year's report. Erich cited state level work as being an effective complement to the national work. For example, the California report is called "Green Watchdog" and has made an impact on state level budgeting.

The call then opened to Q&A, and the first question was about balancing tax increases on the wealthy and on corporations, with the concern that all the talk is just about raising taxes on the wealthy. Ryan answered that the Super Committee is looking more at corporate taxes than individual taxes, and that the battle lines will be drawn along simplifying the code. Erich added that they are also looking at revenue raisers, like carbon taxes and fossil fuel fees. FOE's primary concern is that corporate tax breaks will be cut in exchange for lowering the corporate tax rate.

Another member asked about the new carbon tax in Australia, and if it has implications for U.S. policy. Erich answered that in the last climate bill debate, some Members did go on record in support of a carbon tax, which opens the door to a debate now. Once we get past the immediate business of the Super Committee, Erich predicts that the timing is right for another attempt at a carbon tax.

In response to a question about how the Super Committee process will end, Ryan compared it to a "bland" bargain, where the deal will include just enough to meet the target of \$1.2 trillion in cuts. What remains to be seen will be the impact of cuts on environmental programs, which has been the subject of a disproportionate amount of reduction.

The final questions of the call pertained to lobbying and advocacy. Ryan reiterated the importance of spreading the word about Green Scissors, and noted that unfortunately information often stops at the Congressional Legislative Aide. Members of Congress don't always see everything that comes through the office, so it's helpful to remind them of the information. TCS and FOE have been coordinating awareness-raising activities in districts, but have not yet attempted a Capitol Hill lobby day around Green Scissors.