



**Tuesday, July 13, 2004**

### **Benson's C-minus**

New Hampshire Governor Craig Benson says his environmental report card, recently released by the Granite State Conservation Voters Alliance, is "a clear political tool."

He's absolutely right.

The report is clear in pointing out the governor's mediocre environmental record during the past year and a half. It gives him a C-minus.

It is political in the sense that it offers New Hampshire voters information they might eventually find useful at the polls. It consists of information one would be hard-pressed to find anywhere else.

Benson's barely literate response — posted on the state Web site — suggests that the mean old conservation alliance is out to get him. He is confusing the report's intentions with its findings. The alliance is a nonpartisan organization formed last year to make sure the environment is on the electoral agenda. The group's board of directors includes Republicans as well as Democrats. It is biased toward environmental protection, not toward any party or candidate.

The governor's implication that the alliance is out to get him makes no more sense than his complaint in Swanzey a few weeks ago that the sexual harassment allegation leveled against former attorney general Peter Heed was designed to "make me look bad." This governor sometimes shows a level of sensitivity one would expect to find in an elementary school. Not unexpectedly, he is not happy with his C-minus.

By and large, however, that grade does not reflect a slew of disastrous environmental policies emanating from the governor's office. In fact, the report lists a number of positive steps attributable to Benson and his administration. What keeps the governor's score in the just-barely-gentleman-C range is his indifference — his unwillingness to fight for even modest environmental measures. For example, he proposed significant but not fatal cuts in both the Land & Community Heritage Investment Program and in the Water Supply Protection Program. Yet, when the Legislature went much further, gutting those valuable programs, Benson offered no objection. The land program was chopped 90 percent, the water program 80 percent. That should have been an occasion for executive outrage.

Similarly, the alliance found Benson exercised poor or no gubernatorial leadership on clean air, wildlife protection, managing growth, and global warming. The complete report can be found online at [voteconservation.org](http://voteconservation.org). The governor's reply is at [nh.gov](http://nh.gov).

Taken together, these two documents do not indicate that Craig Benson wants to trash New Hampshire's environment, although his policies hardly show a passion for conservation. The governor's heart may be in the right place. But his political ideology not only prevents meaningful environmental progress; it also erodes protections left in place by earlier administrations. Benson makes such a virtue out of refusing to consider restructuring the tax system that the state can't raise enough money to handle its current needs, to say nothing of meeting obligations to future generations.

"Unfortunately, conservation leadership that once existed in Concord does not exist today," says Rick Russman of Kingston, a Republican and a former state senator who is chairman of the alliance.

The governor was lucky to get his C-minus.