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Pollution Probe focuses on building partnerships

Pollution probe is the granddaddy of Canadian environmental organizations, founded in 1969 on the campus of the University of Toronto, but it is still evolving.

Created as an advocacy group for protection of the environment, Pollution Probe has become a partnership-building organization, bringing government agencies, private businesses and other stakeholders to the table to look at challenges and help to build solutions, says Ken Olgivie, executive director.

“Advocacy is still needed,” he says. “But that represents a small fraction of what we do now,” he says.

“You need coalition-building to put policies in place to solve real problems,” he says. “At Pollution Probe, we want to be a leader in the debate.”

Developing and implementing new policies is the way to affect change, according to Olgivie who worked on policies with provincial governments in Manitoba, Ontario and Ottawa before joining Pollution Probe 10 years ago.

“We also have to work to educate the public to be receptive to policy change,” he says.

He gives an example of how policy affects the environment. If the policy is to provide more highways and cheap gasoline, there will be more people driving SUVs, more pollution and ever more highways, he says.

However, if there is a policy of building more bike paths, putting more money into rail transit, generally providing adequate, affordable public transit and designing sustainable communities, the result is less pollution and less urban sprawl.

Pollution Probe is results oriented, choosing issues and activities where they believe they can achieve results, Ogilvie says. "We adopt good ideas where we can find them, based on the good of the environment and not on philosophical or ideological labels."

For example, the organization convened a series of six workshops to discuss the requirements for development and promotion of green power in Canada, using renewable resources such as solar and wind power as well as wave and tidal power and energy from biomass.

Government representatives, potential investors, policy experts and developers and marketers in the renewable energy industry attended the workshops that resulted in a report on the status of green power and options for further development.

About 225,000 copies of Pollution Probe's Green Consumer Guide have been sold across Canada.

The organization is convening a series of workshops this year to examine the state of water policy in Canada.

A donor-based organization with about 7,000 active members, Pollution Probe has a staff of 18 and does its own research on environmental issues concentrating on air pollution, water pollution and climate change.

The organization engages directly with the public through public forums on environmental issues and informs its members through its newsletter and numerous research reports.

"Our donors want to do something for the environment but they don't usually provide direct input," Ogilvie explains. "We do the research and tell the public what needs to be done and they support our efforts."