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Because It's Important, That's Why

By Brent Olson

About three months ago I drove to the Capitol to testify before a committee of the legislature. It's a job I do every now and then, and every time I do, I spend the whole drive home swearing that I'll never do it again.

Everything actually went pretty well, considering I spent eight hours in a car in order to spend eight minutes talking to a roomful of people who were already bored before I got up to talk and, apparently, things didn't get any better for them while I was there.

I wasn't too thrilled to see them either. In the middle of soybean harvest, a time of year when I take most of my meals on the seat of a combine, I instead found myself working my way through city traffic and wearing good clothes.

One nice thing happened – I got to have lunch with my sister (she even picked up the tab). It was delicious, especially the sweet and sour sauce, which I dribbled all over my shirt.

So, there I was in the bowels of the Capitol office building, surrounded by corporate lawyers and lobbyists in black suits, and me in my blue shirt with stains all down the front. Everyone was meetin' and greetin' with firm handshakes, good eye contact and an astute awareness of when someone more important was coming down the aisle. It was networking paradise.

And I am so bad at it. Really. I can be in schmoozer's heaven - a free buffet, surrounded by hungry, important people - and I always end up sharing string cheese with a janitor out on the loading dock. I just have no talent for sucking up to powerful people. It's kind of a handicap.

So, let's recap. I was in a place I didn't want to be, on a day I didn't want to be there, doing something I'm not very good at, with people who aren't particularly fond of me. Why?

Well, because it was important.

The hearing concerned renewable fuels – you know, wind power, biodiesel, biomass generators - stuff like that.

Out here on the prairie we have had a very, very bad habit. We've made enormous amounts of money, but usually for someone else. Railroads, grain companies, investment banks - the list of people we've made rich goes on and on. From my great grandfather to me and everyone in between, we've all played the same game.

It needs to stop. We live where the wind blows, the sun shines, and the crops grow. The power lines begin here and turn the lights on for people all over the country and, you know what? It's time we got our share. It's time to make money and keep it right here, providing security for our families and jobs for our young people.

That's why I was in St. Paul, on a day when I didn't want to be. A large share of our country has decided that maybe it's not such a good idea to plan on getting all our energy from a part of world that hates America. Any alternative has to include the people out here. There are opportunities opening up, chances to prosper while at the same time accomplishing something important, and the people in St. Paul are the ones who will be making the rules.

We are responsible for making sure they listen to us. And, it shouldn't be that hard. For one thing, renewables help their constituents make money. I involved in an ethanol plant and in three years I re-couped my investment in dividends and the stock price quadrupled. Granted, that is an extraordinary return, but with most of the stock being sold to farmers within 60 miles, that's also an enormous amount of created wealth to add to the local economy. Next, renewables are good for the environment, which some people see as a warm and fuzzy reason; I prefer to think of it as ensuring that my grandchildren will be able to breathe the air and drink the water. Third, developing our own energy supplies is a profoundly patriotic act. Our son was in the Marine Corps and he spent one Christmas in a tent, in Kuwait. When people talk about the price of oil, there's an added cost that should be added to the equation.

For nearly 150 years, the future of the folks on the prairie has been in the hands of big banks, big government, big railroads...the list goes on and on. Right here, right now, the future is in our hands. We just need to grasp and hold on tight.

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