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Andrea Mazza

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**Real Results For The Real World:
Steve Mahfood Brings His Experience
and Philosophy to the
Missouri Department of Natural Resources**

by Andrea Mazza*

In January 1998, Steve Mahfood was appointed Director of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (MDNR). Barely a month into his tenure, Mahfood sat with the *Missouri Environmental Law & Policy Review* and discussed both his goals for the MDNR and the challenges facing Missouri's environment.

*I. Personal History: Early,
Varied Environmental Interests*

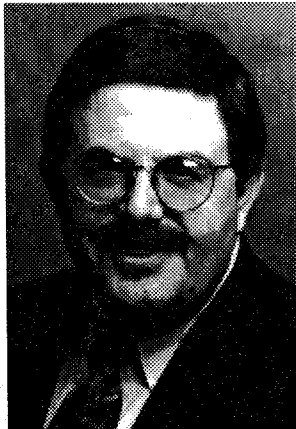
Mahfood was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri.

Although he did not decide upon an environmental career until college, early experiences helped shape his future professional goals. As a child, he frequently visited his grandparents' farm, where he gained an appreciation of nature and enjoyed the rural Missouri landscape. He explored the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers with his stepfather, a part-time commercial fisherman, and examined the local fish and wildlife. Mahfood also vividly remembers the air pollution that marred his south St. Louis neighborhood, a

problem that remained largely unaddressed until the 1970s.

With these impressions in mind, Mahfood embarked upon a career in environmental affairs--a career that has exposed him to regional, state, and international ecological concerns. Mahfood brings diverse job training to his new position at the MDNR. He states that he devoted his professional life to environmentalism "before it was the thing to do . . . before the first Earth Day."

He is a graduate of the Rutgers University School of Environmental Science and Agriculture and the Yale University Environmental Leadership Program, and he has completed coursework at the University of London, Washington University, and the University of Missouri-Columbia. While attending college on the East Coast, he worked with



STEPHEN M. MAHFOOD

Prior to his appointment as Director of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources in 1998, Mr. Mahfood served as Director of the Missouri Environmental Improvement and Energy Resources Authority (EIERA) beginning in 1984. During his tenure, the EIERA

completed over four billion dollars in environmental and energy project financings and five million dollars in local projects research and technical assistance. The agency was recognized for a number of its leading environmental, financial and energy projects. The EIERA contributed greatly to the process of change in behavior, policy, legislation and education by building bridges, coalitions and partnerships both in the State of Missouri and nationally.

Mr. Mahfood is Co-Founder of the Council of Infrastructure Finance Authorities (CIFA), Co-Founder of the National Pollution Prevention Roundtable, Member of the Environmental Finance Advisory Board of the EPA, Finance Chairman of the Rebuild America Energy Efficiency Partnership in Kansas City, Member of the Missouri State Treasurer's Financing Policy Advisory Committee, Member of the Missouri Public Service Commission Task Force on Utility Restructuring, and a Board member of the Anthony Congressional Commission on Infrastructure Finance, the National Governors' Association Environmental Technical Panel, the Midwest Energy Advisory Board of the Union of Concerned Scientists and was Past-President of both the National Council of Pollution Control Financing Agencies and the Missouri Waste Control Coalition.

Mahfood resides in mid-Missouri with his wife, Kas. He has three daughters, Nadia, 23, Toni, 28, and Leila, 20.

Hudson River wetlands projects and urban environmental concerns.

After graduation, he returned to St. Louis, where he accepted a position with East-West Gateway Coordinating Council and became that city's first environmental planning director. He also worked as an environmental director for the St. Louis County Health Department. Having worked with both city and regional issues, Mahfood decided to expand his environmental experiences with a move to Tunisia. There, he served as CARE's North African and Middle East Environmental Director. Several years later he moved back to Missouri and became the assistant director of the Division of Health and the director of the state's Health Planning Agency. He then moved to the Blue Ridge Mountains, where he worked with an environmental research center/park affiliated with the University of North Carolina. Returning once more to Missouri, he served as director of the state's Environmental Improvement and Energy Resources Authority (EIERA), linking the goals of Missouri's environmental and business communities. He held that position for nearly fourteen years before accepting his current position at the Department of Natural Resources.

Mahfood counts his nearly two hundred relatives, spread across seven Missouri counties, as his most loyal—and vocal—constituents, stating that at least half of them have already expressed their environmental concerns in his first month of office.

II. A Legacy of Professional-

ism, A Goal of Cooperation

Mahfood replaced David Shorr as director of the MDNR. He has high praise for his predecessor and especially noted Shorr's determined, professional attitude.

"David [came] up with a positive outlook on what we have to carry out. He was able to take what was a very difficult situation when he walked in the door and turn it into a good situation. Our relationships with business, environmental communities, and the General Assembly had deteriorated, and he . . . brought back our credibility with all of those organizations and put us on the road to making the additional improvements that I hope to make."

Mahfood plans to continue Shorr's legacy of professionalism and assert a "collaborative, cooperative approach" in the MDNR's business and legislative relationships. Such an attitude of cooperation is essential to the Department's future success, for as Mahfood states, "We [the MDNR] get accused of being confrontational before we even start into anything, and I don't think it has to be that way."

Collaboration is just as vital internally as externally, and agency management is especially complex in the MDNR, with its wide and varied array of programs. Mahfood envisions a cooperative, informed agency where employees fully participate in MDNR management.

"I like the collaborative partnership approach, where staff are involved in the decision-making, people understand what decisions were made and why they were made. Involve people that have

responsibility in the decision-making process, and then allow them to see the results of their work. That may seem like a simple task, but when you've got a couple thousand people, working on many different kinds of programs—from energy, parks, environmental quality—it's hard to get that kind of unity going. It's not going to happen with a magic wand It's continual improvement and continual pressure to reach the goal of doing the best that we can."

After his appointment, Mahfood announced as his policy goal "real results for the real world." He is determined to make environmental improvements that intimately affect the people of Missouri and lessen the bureaucratic entanglements that stand in the Department's way. Mahfood measures the success of the MDNR through the quality of its services, not specific numeric quotes.

"What counts is not how many inspections we did, or how many people visited a park—that's not the bottom line. The bottom line is, did we improve the environment? Did the people enjoy the state park?" Mahfood laments what he terms a "la-la land" mentality, "when decisions are made that have no relationship whatsoever to how the real world works, or how other people live or work or think," and strives instead to make judgments "that are real and can have a real impact on Missouri."

When asked to name the greatest challenge facing the MDNR, Mahfood immediately replied, "being able to deal with the multiple

challenges we have.” The sheer number of programs under MDNR auspices, with their time constraints and ever-present deadlines, makes Department synchronization difficult.

While admitting the complexity of his new responsibilities, Mahfood remains undaunted: “New ideas, new thoughts, new issues—it can be overwhelming if you let it get to you. . . . But that challenge of sorting everything out everyday, whether it’s an inspection and maintenance air pollution issue in St. Louis or [an] agricultural issue, or acquisition of a state park, or improving energy efficiency in state buildings—these issues are all extremely important. . . . [The challenge is] to make some progress with all of them without dropping them off the list, and without losing your mind on top of it. . . .”

Mahfood credits his staff with allowing him to meet these goals and ultimately hopes to change the way the MDNR addresses environmental concerns. Past problem-solving has tended to find immediate solutions while ignoring their future effects. Mahfood places greater influence on planning and prospective improvement and believes the MDNR must follow in this vein. In the coming months, he will help the agency shift its focus from short-term to long-range solutions. As he states, “We have to plan, and we have to learn to like to plan. If we don’t, we’re not going to be able to deal with what future issues come down the pike.”

According to Mahfood, the MDNR’s goals cannot be

achieved in a vacuum; rather, the agency needs the support of both lawmakers and their constituents. The Department has received “a tremendous amount of support” from Governor Carnahan. The General Assembly has also expressed a willingness to support environmental concerns; Mahfood states that they have “been very supportive when they understand the issues and [the MDNR] was given the opportunity to explain what we need to do.”

Mahfood would like to see an increase in citizen support, both at the local and state levels. “Citizens really need to be aware of the issues that affect them, and they need to be able to tell us what is important, and we need to listen. . . . And that kind of communication—there’s not as much of it as most people would like to think.”

III. The Role of Citizen Support

Mahfood is especially concerned with the level of citizen involvement within the state. He firmly believes that goals cannot be formulated and programs cannot be implemented unless Missouri residents voice their opinions to the MDNR. While Mahfood wants the MDNR to communicate issues and plans to the people of Missouri, he is “more interested” in hearing from the citizens themselves. Such input can ultimately shape the MDNR’s environmental agenda, and Mahfood states that citizen “expectations should be some of the key things that drive” his agency. Mahfood does not intend to merely teach Missourians about the function of the MDNR; rather, he hopes to give informed citizens a sense of empowerment and re-

sponsibility.

“You can educate people, but most people are not really too interested in how we do our business. . . . I think we best reach people when we give them the tools to understand what their own needs are.”

Mahfood cites energy efficiency as an example of a citizen-led environmental improvement. Energy consumption is essentially a series of personal choices, from what method of transportation to take to work to what type of power plant would best serve the needs of a community. Mahfood realizes that the MDNR created “a lot of reaction” when his agency provided the public with information about energy use; ultimately, informed Missourians began to examine their own energy consumption habits. While Mahfood does not hesitate to encourage or make suggestions to the public, his approach to citizen empowerment is rather simple: “I like just putting the information out there and letting people basically draw their own conclusions. . . . It’s important for people to know what we can do. It’s more important for them to understand what their community standards are, what they feel about the issues, and communicate that, not just to us, but to their elected representatives.”

Informing and empowering Missouri residents is by no means an easy task, and Mahfood readily admits this: “Frankly, I get frustrated because sometimes I don’t think we know enough about how to do that.” The MDNR, however, is employing several techniques to increase environmental awareness,

such as public access records rooms and an Internet access site. While public hearings are governed by statute, Mahfood would like to see these hearings held earlier in the decision-making processes in an effort to allow greater citizen discussion.

Sadly, environmental activism does not abound in Missouri. Mahfood notes that while the citizens of other states regularly pressure their legislatures about ecological concerns, "probably a handful of people [in Missouri] really have a major, positive impact on what happens, from an activist standpoint." Citizen activism is "very important" to Mahfood, for activists are not limited by agency restraints and mandates. Activism can also inform citizens about environmental issues that may not yet be known within the MDNR. Mahfood himself depends on the activists' research. "It's amazing how much you can learn by just looking at what the various interests [are], whether they're environmental activists or activists in a particular area of interest. Reading the information really gives you a pretty broad viewpoint."

When asked how the MDNR could raise environmental activism within Missouri, Mahfood stated that he did not have "an easy answer. It's been a question that's been asked for years." Perhaps the best solution, in Mahfood's opinion, is to raise issues of local/regional interest and create personal connections to environmental concerns. A variety of problems, from confined-animal feed lot operations to traffic congestion and air pollution "are issues people can

understand and relate to, because they're right there in front of them." Mahfood stresses further emphasis on these and other community concerns, but the activists' success ultimately hinges on the issues they choose to fight. To Mahfood, activism is practical and pragmatic.

"You want to try to get something done, so you go after those issues [where] you can have those successes. From an activist's standpoint, you go after those things that you can have some successes on, and people see that you're successful at making some change improving our environment, protecting our resources. Then people react very positively to that, and then they want to become more involved. As the ball starts rolling, it gets bigger."

IV. Specific Environmental Challenges

Throughout his career, Mahfood has combined his concern for the environment with his interest in planning. He notes the special challenges planning poses in Missouri, a state with "very intense, . . . long-term and difficult" urban issues such as pollution and "insidious," slowly escalating rural problems such as erosion and reforestation. Developing answers to meet such varied state environmental questions is a complex process; as Mahfood states, "each of those problems requires a different thought process . . . what's important to them [the people of urban Missouri and the people of rural Missouri] is oftentimes different [and] has to be taken into consideration . . . you have to be able to deal with human beings. . . the ultimate job [is] preserving and

protecting our environment here in Missouri, and that's a tall order."

Mahfood then discussed some specific state environmental issues:

Water: Mahfood believes that perhaps the most serious long-term environmental harm facing Missouri is the condition of the state's water resources. Water quality and quantity will be crucial concerns in the Twenty-First Century, and Mahfood reports that the state must protect all forms of water usage.

"Most of the major issues, from the perspective of their impact on the environment, and their cost to the economy, are going to center on our water here in the state of Missouri, and as population goes up, [the] difficulty in maintaining water quality will be . . . an interesting problem."

Mahfood sees a definite link between the state's economic and ecological health: "As the economy does better, and individuals do better, there's more pressure on the environment. But at the same time, as the economy does better . . . generally the environment improves *if* you keep the pressure up, if the issues are brought out to the public, because the public and the General Assembly are more willing to spend money to help make the environment what we want it to be." Even the Department of Tourism recognizes the importance of Missouri's waters; recently, it decided to change the state's marketing slogan from "Wake Up to Missouri" to "Where the Rivers Run."

Mahfood noted current programs to protect and restore Missouri's waters. Congress

passed the Safe Drinking Water Act in 1997, and currently, the Missouri legislature is considering a bill to authorize the Safe Drinking Water Act's initiatives within the state. This would provide the MDNR with more than \$20 million in federal funding that could be leveraged through EIARA. The leverage would ultimately provide MDNR with \$60-80 million, which would be used to improve the state's rural water treatment facilities.

Mahfood also noted that Missouri "has one of the top three programs" in the country to handle wastewater and its treatment. Missouri's wastewater programs have also received a triple-A financial rating, an honor bestowed to only two other state wastewater initiatives. Since 1991, the MDNR, in cooperation with the EPA, has loaned almost \$800 million to water treatment plants across Missouri. Mahfood remains committed to water protection; as he states, "In this state, the water is our heritage."

Waste Tires: Mahfood has been "very involved in the waste tire issue" for the past several years. A decade ago, the state planned to fund businesses that would take and utilize waste tires. Finding uses for waste tires, however, is a difficult and expensive process. Missourians combined waste tires with road asphalt, creating a rubberized asphalt that lasts longer and is more flexible than standard asphalt. The rubberized asphalt is, however, approximately 10% more expensive to transport; its higher cost made its use impractical.

Today, Missouri's waste

tires are used to create both tire-derived fuel (tdf) and a relatively soft playground fill. Currently, five Missouri sites annually take and use the state's 3,750,000 waste tires, but these businesses cannot fully meet the state's needs, for Missourians create nearly five million waste tires each year. State law controls just what the MDNR can do to harness waste tires; the General Assembly has changed laws governing waste tire fees and mandated that the DNR clean up existing state tire piles. Mahfood has no objection to these mandates, but in the near future he would like to allocate some funds away from tire disposal and incineration to finding alternative tire uses.

Hog Farming: Hog farming, and especially the odors created from hog farming enterprises, pose special concerns for both large-scale commercial farmers and private residents throughout Missouri. Generally, problems arising from hog farming have been treated as nuisance rather than environmental issues. This distinction, however, did not keep Mahfood from voicing his opinion on the subject.

Mahfood believes the odor problem is "the major issue that plagues corporate agriculture right now." He fully supports the Air Conservation Commission's appointment of a working group to study odor regulations for the state's largest animal feedlots. Mahfood believes that commercial farmers will somehow "have to come to grips with this problem" but is "very confident" that corporate agriculture "recognize[s] that the future of their industry depends on

how they deal with the odor issue."

Steve Mahfood's personal and professional experience has influenced his attitudes towards the environment and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources. As the Director of the MDNR, Mahfood hopes to inspire a sense of activism among the citizens of Missouri and to find lasting solutions to such problems as water resources and waste tires. His commitment to an organized, professional agency structure will guide his approach to statewide environmental challenges.

*The author wishes to express her sincere thanks to Mr. Steve Mahfood for granting his time to MELPR for an interview, and to Ms. Nina Thompson of the MDNR for her assistance in providing the statistical information used in this article.