

END PIECE

Why direct political engagement matters for the oceans and organic agriculture

**By David Wilmot and
Mike Dunmyer**

When we think of organic agriculture, we think of farmers, healthy food, healthy land and healthy oceans. That's right! Healthy oceans and organic farming go together because our land, water and oceans are connected. As part of the coverage of the BP oil-spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, you likely heard or read about the so-called "Dead Zone."

Industrialized conventional farming waste finds its way into streams, rivers and, ultimately, the Mississippi River. When spring rains fill the Mississippi, fertilizer floods into the Gulf of Mexico, causing a massive algal bloom, which decays and removes the oxygen from the water, causing a massive dead zone where dolphins, sea turtles, fish and other marine animals cannot survive. Dead zones and toxic algal blooms (sometimes called "red tides"), often caused by conventional farming runoff, are growing in frequency, duration and size, and are devastating oceans and coastal economies.

Expanding organic agriculture is important for reasons beyond the health of the oceans and involves support for organic farming in public policy. We believe OTA has taken an important step to enhancing its ability to advance organic policy with the creation of Organic PAC.

Elections matter. If you care about a policy issue like ocean health or organic practices, success requires working closely with and rewarding (e.g., helping get them elected and re-elected) those politicians who work to advance the



David Wilmot



Mike Dunmyer

cause, as well as holding accountable those politicians who would hold it back. It wasn't long ago that ocean conservationists focused only on policy and were not involved in electoral politics. This has changed.

In 2003 and 2004, two ocean commissions—one independent and the other created by the federal government—released their findings. It was already widely understood that the oceans were in crisis, but the reports provided clarity by detailing the complexity and scale of the problems facing the oceans and proposing a number of policy solutions and reforms. At the same time, one of us (David) was co-authoring a study that looked in depth at the effectiveness of the ocean conservation movement. Recognizing that there were successful public advocacy organizations that regularly won policy victories on Capitol Hill, the study set out to identify how this happened.

We found that they all employ the same set of tools and strategic elements, including fundraising, communications, and grassroots. However, one particular tool stood out—participating fully in the political process (professional and

grassroots lobbying AND direct involvement in the electoral process). Electoral politics is a fundamental aspect of our nation's political process and the keystone to successfully advancing policy change. Thus, while a growing force of highly professional activists was working toward ocean reforms, they lacked the political power needed to achieve victory because they had not participated in the electoral process. Seeing this critical gap, we began the process of making the oceans a political issue by founding Ocean Champions—the first (and still the only) ocean-focused organization working to elect political champions for ocean conservation.

As a political organization focused on oceans, and designed with the necessary political tools at our disposal (direct financial support to candidates, awareness building of candidates' ocean conservation records, and targeted campaigns to help elect pro-ocean candidates or defeat bad candidates), Ocean Champions represented a significant departure from the ocean conservation community's traditional approach. Organic PAC represents a similar evolution in the organic community. The description of Organic PAC's role (see Page 10) is tremendously insightful and highlights critical elements for success such as the value of relationships, the need to show a commitment to those who have or could help you, and the need for a non-partisan approach.

Ocean Champions' electoral and legislative successes are an encouraging corollary. Ocean Champions has helped elect nearly 50 politicians (Democrats and

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Republicans) to the U.S. House and Senate. We:

- Endorse and support members of Congress with a resumé of leadership such as Congressman Sam Farr (D-CA),
- Support members whom we believe have the potential to become stronger leaders, and
- Help elect brand-new members who can become leaders on one or more ocean issues.

We have helped almost a dozen new members win their first race (in some cases their primary) ranging from Congressman Connie Mack (R-FL) to Senator Mark Begich (D-AK) to Congresswoman Kathy Castor (D-FL). We have also helped defeat anti-ocean politicians.

It is encouraging that more and more members, including key committee chairmen and senior

members, are providing the leadership needed to advance positive ocean legislation. Working in a pragmatic, non-partisan way with a focus on building real and lasting relationships, Ocean Champions advances critical ocean legislation on issues ranging from harmful algal blooms and dead zones, to fisheries reform, to our nation's response to the BP oil spill in the Gulf.

The model you have chosen works. It is first and foremost about relationships, and non-partisanship is key. As with any human interaction, however, building strong, trusting relationships in the political arena will take time, and patience in the early stages is important. Focus on being a consistent and dependable voice while understanding the real politics that members of Congress face. Demanding or expecting perfection is not practical in this highly complex world. However, a

reasonable, pragmatic, and engaged strategy will definitely yield results.

At Ocean Champions, we feel a kinship to Organic PAC. Our communities are following similar evolutions in their political participation, and we both face competition from large, established players. More importantly, our interests are aligned as organic practices promote healthy oceans, and healthy oceans moderate climate to sustain predictable farming weather. We cheer your decision to start down this path, and look forward to harnessing our combined strength on important issues that matter to us both. ■

David Wilmot is the President and Co-Founder of Ocean Champions, and Mike Dunmyer is the Executive Director. Ocean Champions is the only non-profit political organization that endorses pro-ocean Congressional candidates and lobbies members of Congress on behalf of the oceans.