



# GlobalPDX Podcast

## Episode 9 Transcript

*With Earl Blumenauer*

### **Andrea Johnson**

Hello, and welcome to the GlobalPDX podcast. As we have come to accept that the virtual working world is here to stay for quite a while, we're excited to continue this podcast and provide connection, content, and support to Oregon's Hub of Global Change Makers. My name is Andrea Johnson, and I'm [the Chair the GlobalPDX Advisory Board](#), and the Executive Director at [Green Empowerment](#).

In today's Speaking Change podcast we are joined by Congressman Earl Blumenauer. He is currently a member of the Ways and Means Committee, Chairman of a Subcommittee on Trade, and a member of the Subcommittee on Health. Earl's a lifelong Portland resident, first elected to the House of Representatives in 1996. Earl was one of the youngest legislators in Oregon's history, and was also Multnomah County Commissioner and a member of the Portland City Council before taking his efforts National. Earl's full bio can be found on the [GlobalPDX.org](#) website. Earl, thank you so much for joining me today.

### **Earl Blumenauer**

My pleasure!

### **Andrea**

So obviously there's a lot we could be talking about giving your multiple roles in the U.S. Congress, but one of the reasons we're so excited to have you is because of your work Water Sanitation Hygiene (or WASH) Caucus. So before we dive in, can you get our listeners a quick overview of what the WASH Caucus is, and what its goals are?

### **Earl**

Sure. I've been working in this space throughout my congressional career. I had been struck that access to clean drinking water and sanitation was critical. It ties in to so many of our objectives in terms of environment, Global Health, even National Security, but it really hasn't had the focus that I think it merits. So what we have done, there's (I don't know, two hundred and ten?) causes in Congress. As Congress becomes less functional on the committee level, people band together informally to try and spotlight critical areas. So this caucus will provide focused oversight and advocacy round water and sanitation issues (which as I mention, is just absolutely essential to our Global Health, economic productivity, the ecosystems function, and National Security). And this is a way for us to demonstrate that bipartisan support, bringing people



together from both parties. Not just members of Congress, but even more important are the certified smart young people who really run the place. To be able to be current on these issues, to be able to share updated information, to bring in speakers, who can help keep folks aware of recent developments, and provide a different type of focus that's really not possible through the committee system.

### **Andrea**

So you've mentioned that kind of "not possible", and obviously we are in a pretty tumultuous time here politically in the United States, and so why are you focusing on International work like this? You mentioned bipartisan which seems like a foreign concept almost.

### **Earl**

Well sadly it is. But being able to deal with the fact is there are almost a billion people (I think 785 million is the latest estimate but it's a staggering figure) of people who do not have access to clean drinking water. And those, in some cases, who do have it pay an exorbitant price. There are 2 billion people who do not have access to proper sanitation. There are more cell phones than toilets in India. This is absolutely unfathomable for so many of us but it has very significant implications. And we're looking over the course of the next 10 years in this era of climate disruption, drought, flood, that we're going to have almost 3 billion people, in 48 countries, who will face water shortages.

I mean this is something that is absolutely imperative that we address, and it isn't a Republican or Democratic issue. We've had great success in having Republican partners move forward (now, candidly where we run into trouble with them is that they didn't want to spend money on this problem which is a little frustrating, although I think we're The Biden administration and Democrats in control of the House and Senate we may be able to get past that). But it is one of the few areas where people can come together across party lines. In fact some of the most... wait a minute, I am trying to be polite in terms of people who are really "out there" in terms of their ideology, in terms of their partisanship, do have a soft spot for dealing with the problem: that there are 5 million children that will die as a result of lack of water and sanitation. So this is a way to bridge those gaps, and I think it'll not only help us solve this problem, but it may help us function better as a congress

### **Andrea**

Man, that is really oddly encouraging to hear. I think, you know, at Green Empowerment we work in WASH and I will just say I'm pretty impressed at how well versed you are in both the importance of it, and also just understanding the scale of the impact. So what brought you to the kind of WASH sector in terms of thinking and understanding it? What brought you to this?



## Earl

Well I've been involved with water and sanitation since I was involved in local government and had a chance to understand how important it was, how expensive it was, and how people take it for granted until it's not there. But I have kind of a legacy of international water and sanitation. I came to Congress just as Paul Simon, an Oregonian (a senator with Oregon roots from Illinois), was leaving. And he was passionate about the topic. He presented me with a picture and his book "Capped Out" and it's something that I took to heart. Not just because of my experience with the issue but because I came to Congress at a time of the partisan divisions. Newt Gingrich, and the contract on America, and things that really made it hard to function, kind of weaponize things. But it was clear this was an area that had unusual promise to be able to get something done that didn't have to be intensely partisan.

And nothing in my experience since has indicated that that's not the case. We've had some amazing partners, there is Texan named Ted Poe, a very conservative judge from Texas, who had a passion for this. We worked with Ted and in the course of a couple years he could give my speech better than I could! And so it just illustrates the power of this issue. At the same time every day that goes by we find more indications that it is critical (and we think now what's going on with the Covid-19 crisis going around the globe, and there are *three billion people who can't wash their hands at home*). So it always has a dimension that captures our attention, and refocuses the need of moving it forward.

## Andrea

As a WASH Caucus what are some of the ideas that you guys have to start addressing those things? I think a lot of our listeners are probably familiar with WASH, the scope, the intersection of climate, a lot of us are talking about this in our own programs. But from where you sit, what impact do you think you can have, or what priorities are you looking into?

## Earl

First and foremost is really critical for us to drive these points and to give people digestable information. It's not just what I said about, you know, three billion people who don't have access to wash their hands. We've got a billion children affected by neglected tropical diseases that link to sanitation and water. Half of all malnutrition is preventable because it is caused by contaminated water giving these little kids diarrhea. Putting a face on 300,000 baby children, under 5, who die every year. Being able to make those points and then tie that back to our agenda in terms of foreign aid and assistance.

I've had two major pieces of legislation (The Paul Simon Water for the World and The Water for the Poor Act) where we helped focus what the federal government does in terms of its programming. It is important for us, in terms of our International Development, to help establish water and sanitation systems that are simple and effective. In fact you have, as you well know, so many people here in the Portland metropolitan area who are engaged in these missions.



From an NGO with one or two people, to larger scale operations like [Mercy Corps](#) that I have taken this Mission. I love what's happened at Riverdale school over the years. I've got one of my proudest possessions: a shirt that they gave me a few years ago that listed on the back all the villages in Africa that they were involved with helping people with water projects. So this is an opportunity to deal with something that's at a human scale. It doesn't need to be some massive engineering project, it doesn't need to be complex and grotesquely expensive. These are things that can be done on a person-to-person basis one Village at a time.

**Andrea**

I kind of think you should be Green Empowerment's spokes person, because you are doing a better job than perhaps I am at selling this!

**Earl**

No no no! (laughs)

I am just really struck by the resources we have here. We had update session a couple weeks ago, I brought some new people that I wasn't familiar with with some old friends, there's a lot of horsepower here. And it is a person-to-person effort where people can see the results, and no matter what the level of expertise, the funding, there are things that can be done. And we want to get that across in Congress. We want to have that same sort of spirit. We want to empower the NGOs and to help individual members of Congress to embrace this. To take part of the agenda in terms of what we do with the USAID budget, what we do with International Education, what we do with our partnership with international organizations, World Health and United Nations, as well the NGOs. There's any range of opportunities, and we want people to zero in on something that they care about and then pair it up with a group/organization (either in their District or state or just one that gets on their radar screen) that touches their heart.

**Andrea**

Well wonderful, you're definitely speaking the language of GlobalPDX and our mission which is *uniting Oregon's Global Changemakers*, Which you are a great representative of, so thank you! So why the questions I get, and I know many of my colleagues/peers get, which is: why focus on international issues when there are so many issues here at home? And I would love to hear your response to that, knowing that you have a lot of work to do on behalf of your constituents here at home.

**Earl**

I don't think they're mutually exclusive at all. I think the more that we focus on how we fit into this equation globally, it helps us focus more attention locally. And that the notion that we can raise the awareness, if people understand how critical safe drinking water and sanitation is globally, you know we've got problems in this country! We have conditions where, particularly in some



Southern States, there has recently been tremendous attention given to Champions who've been trying to deal with safe drinking water and sanitation in low-income communities. And it's not just in the South. Flint Michigan is kind of a case study, of where a Northern Industrial State had huge problems in terms of lead in the drinking water. We have a situation today with the Covid in crisis, where there are people who just are holding on by their fingertips. You know, trying to not get evicted. We've had a water and sanitation shut off because people haven't been able to pay their bills. Well that is unconscionable. We shouldn't put people in a situation where they have to choose between paying the rent, and being able to flush the toilet, or being able to clean their children's hands.

I think the more that we can have people understand how we are all in this together, that water and sanitation is a fundamental right. It's not cheap but it is much less expensive than what we deal with the lack of it (in terms of disease, in terms of the problems that people have). I think this is a key to have that empathy, it to be able to broaden our vision, and make sure that people understand that we're all in this together. And the same solutions that we're going to have in some rural communities in Oregon, to be able to protect access to safe drinking water and sanitation, is key to dealing with problems in sub-Saharan Africa or South East Asia.

### **Andrea**

I definitely agree, and that response resonates with me quite a bit. One of the things that came to mind as well when you said, "we're all in this together" is the intersection of climate change as well. You mentioned that but that seems to contradict partisanship knowing that maybe the other side of the aisle is not as open to accepting the impacts of climate change, or addressing it. So how do you talk about climate impacts on WASH in that space?

### **Earl**

I'm really glad you raised that Andrea because I see the language of safe drinking water and sanitation as something that can help bridge a divide that otherwise might be very ideological and partisan. Part of what's interesting about dealing with the challenges in water and sanitation is: it kind of makes irrelevant some of the debate. The water's either there, or it's not. It's either safe to drink, or it's not. And people can see what's happening in terms of the encroachment of the desert in Northern Africa. What happens with these extreme weather events that puts people at risk. And candidly it's not just in India or Pakistan, it's what we see extreme weather events in North Carolina.

This to me is a potential linkage that makes the problem real, and you don't have to necessarily agree that it's the result of carbon pollution, and that we need to move forward to have a low carbon future. But we need to have a future that deals with the consequences of extreme weather events, the consequences of these disasters that we are seeing with increasing frequency. And the fact that we need to be able to deal with the water and sanitation infrastructure that are increasingly at risk because of what is happening due to climate change. I think that this is an area that can help bridge the gaps. And if we focus on what is actually



happening and how it's affecting people, I think that there is an area of having a greater linkage and progress. 700 million children are in schools that don't have the latrine. An even greater number are in schools that lack hand washing facilities as they go back to school *in the midst of a pandemic*. An amazing number of hospitals that do not have clean water, to be able to deal with proper sanitation dealing with infections. This is something that's really hard to dispute, and I think it paves the way forward for solutions that we're going to need regardless of the cause. But I do think that this is an area, as you get people working together on solving problems, and they see the progress, and they understand that this is getting worse, I see a little daylight.

### **Andrea**

I hope that our audience shares some of that optimism, because I do see this, I see it from your perspective, and it really feels hopeful. And I really love to hear that. So before we sign off we are recording this podcast on the Monday following President Biden signing the Covid-19 Relief Bill, and I'd be remiss if I didn't ask you how you're feeling right now, about the situation and your ability to make progress on the issues you care about (whether it's this or others)

### **Earl**

Well, one of the reasons we spend so much time dealing with water and sanitation, even when there wasn't a willingness on the part of my Republican colleagues to spend a lot of money, nonetheless it was an avenue where we could see some progress. It's been frustrating to see people, kind of be reluctant to make the investments that are necessary. It's been grudging. And then this new Congress, I mean it started kind of horrifically when we had a mob trying to overturn the results of a free election, and trying to kill members of Congress, hang Mike Pence, this was really jarring. Particularly when there were 137 of my Republican friends that were egging them on. But I think from that moment there's been a galvanizing effort.

The Biden administration, I think, has done everything right. They've not been involved with trying to score political points (in fact they have decidedly been sort of low-key non-political). President Biden went to Texas in the aftermath of that disaster even though Texan terrible policies, and politics, made it worse. He was there to help. We were able to have the Senate under Democratic control which meant all the good legislation that the House sent to the Congress, just to die on Mitch McConnell's desk and never even have a hearing, now it's going to be heard. And the Recovery act, The COVID relief package of 1.9 trillion dollars (dealing with everything from Health Resources, helping people with their health insurance, what's happening with more resources for vaccinations and dealing with covid-19 related problems, to cutting child poverty essentially in half as a result of the expansion of the child tax credit). I've been working for almost a year trying to rescue our restaurants. Independent restaurants in Portland and around the country. And their 28.6 billion dollars to give a lifeline to those areas that makes so much of a difference to our community and elsewhere. As I look across the board all these and so much more represent a breakthrough to be able to actually give people help. We do a lot of work with minority farmers, and that legislation was the largest payment (some 5 billion dollars) for black farmers who had been cheated by the federal government. Discriminated against in



terms of resources. And it's there to help strengthen, and actually make up for past very harmful discrimination that had serious economic consequences.

Case after case, things that make a difference from everyday people's lives, and I think give a signal of hope. I anticipate that we will be able to do more. We've passed legislation dealing with the integrity of the election process, with gun safety... And their future in an evenly divided Senate is uncertain, but at least they will be considered. These are things that people in our community want. They're frustrated that they've never really been given a full hearing, (although we were able to get them passed in the House which is not insignificant). I have legislation that will enshrine in federal law the work that we did with the Oregon elections dealing with mail-in ballots, which are safe, secure, inexpensive, and better in a time of COVID. And I was able to get in that HR1 work that we did in Oregon. I was actually the first member of Congress to ever be elected by an all mail-in ballot! We in Oregon know that that works, it's safe and effective. So these are all things that just make me smile, I hope people are encouraged that they're seeing the light of day, they're being tee'd up, and we're preparing for what will undoubtedly be important struggles down the line, but for the first time we've got a chance to make sure some of them get across the finish line and it starts with that COVID Relief Package.

#### **Andrea**

Well that's really great to hear. It's such an awesome opportunity for myself and for our listeners to hear directly from you. We really appreciate your time. Any other message you would like to leave with our audience today?

#### **Earl**

We just deeply appreciate how much people in our community care. Reaching out to one another, dealing with the Covid crisis, dealing with the cries for racial and economic justice, and fighting for the future of the planet (in terms of a low-carbon future), and the international health challenges. These are all things that I hope they feel good about, because people here in our community are making a difference.

#### **Andrea**

Wonderful, thank you so much Earl for being with us, and thank you for being a Global Changemaker.

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