



THE NUCLEAR NEWS INTERVIEW

## Norris McDonald: The nuclear epiphany of an African-American environmentalist

*McDonald tells of how he came to support nuclear, the challenge of explaining baseload, and educating the black community about nuclear.*

Meet Norris McDonald, founder and president of the African American Environmentalist Association. AAEA is a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting the environment, promoting the efficient use of natural resources, enhancing human, animal and plant ecologies, and increasing African-American participation in the environmental movement.

In his own words, McDonald explains how he became a supporter of nuclear power, to the chagrin, he says, of long-established environmental groups like Greenpeace.

AAEA's Web site is at <<http://groups.msn.com/AAEA>>.

The interview was conducted by Rick Michal, *NN* senior associate editor.

*What is your organization all about?*

I founded the African American Environmentalist Association in 1985. The name is self-descriptive. It exists in order to increase African-American participation in the environmental movement and to clean up the planet. America is still a racially divided country, and there happens to be a black community in every city in the United States. There are a lot of pollution sites in those black communities because they don't have resources or environmental organizations that represent them. AAEA fills that niche. For six years I worked with a mainstream environmental group that is now Friends of the Earth, which was created through the merger of two other organizations—Environmental Policy Institute and Environmental Policy Center. I directed the energy conservation project for what is now Friends of the Earth. I lobbied Congress for them. I am by, of, and from the traditional environmental movement. That's how I came into this work. For a number of issues that the environmentalists worked on, I saw real problems from the black community perspective. Those organizations took some positions that weren't beneficial

to the black community, and certainly not what blacks would espouse. One big one was the no-growth, antidevelopment dogma of the organizations. That was very frustrating to me. Other things, such as using price as a conservation tool, I just couldn't agree with because it would ruin the economy and destroy the black community. Things like that showed me that there needed to be an organization that reflected the perspective of the African-American community, and that is what AAEA is about.

*"Using price as a conservation tool"—could you explain that?*

Environmentalists would probably love to see \$10 or \$20 a gallon gasoline prices, for instance. That would reduce our dependence on imported oil, but it would absolutely destroy the economy, and the black community wouldn't have a chance. To be more realistic, the environmentalists would like to see \$3, \$4, or \$5 a gallon for gas. But if I were a low-income person, scrambling to get to work, pinching that penny already—no, I would oppose that because it's regressive, abusive, and evil. We need affordable gasoline. AAEA promotes the use



**McDonald:** "I tried everything I could, but I could not defeat nuclear power."

of electric hybrid cars now as a solution to some problems, but in addition to that, we need affordable gasoline.

*Where does your membership come from?*

Our membership comes from all over the country, but we're pretty far down on the totem pole for people to contribute \$25 every year. I'm sure they give to the NAACP, the Urban League, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and any of a number of historically black colleges before our organization comes up. Environmental issues, even though they are crucial in the lives of African Americans, are still seen as luxury items. So, an environmental issue has to be talked up before African Americans realize that it's important to their lives. But we do have 5000 members, which include institutional members, organizational members, corporate members, and individual members. For instance, the Greater Washington Board of Trade is a member.

*How did AAEA come to support nuclear power?*

We came to support nuclear power

through my pushing for it following a two-year analysis after an epiphany. One of my hobbies is studying subatomic physics, quantum mechanics. Quantum mechanics is like art. The more I studied it, the more fascinating and interesting it became. I then started looking at using quantum mechanics somehow—and that is through nuclear power. The epiphany was a specific

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## “I want the African-American community and African-American entrepreneurs to be equity owners of new nuclear power plants.”

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moment when I realized, “Oh my goodness! I’m going to support nuclear power.” It literally was a transforming moment for me. I used to work with some of the top antinuclear activists in the country, representing some very widespread groups. They were anti-Price-Anderson, against the storage of nuclear waste, were worried about the proliferation issue, etc. At the time, I was leaning anti because of the organization’s position. This was right after the Three Mile Island accident, and the mentality toward nuclear power then was, “Whoa, wait a minute!” But I myself had never studied nuclear power intensely and hadn’t studied Three Mile Island, because I was running the energy conservation project for the organization, not the nuclear project. So after AAEA was founded, I went back and studied what happened at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. I did a technical analysis of nuclear power and how it works. I tried my best to defeat what I thought could be a good technology. I tried everything I could, but I could not defeat it.

*When did the epiphany occur?*

AAEA just came out publicly for nuclear power in January 2002, so it’s very recent. It was about three years ago that I was studying nuclear power and the epiphany hit me. I didn’t want to come out pronuclear, and in fact I was studying to defeat it. From a public relations and purely business standpoint, certainly, I didn’t want to come out in support of it. I knew I would be seen as a traitor in the traditional environmental community.

*So, AAEA is officially “out of the closet” on this issue?*

Believe me, that fact came out big time at the National Press Club in January 2002. We were immediately attacked by Greenpeace and Public Citizen.

*What did those groups say to you?*

They said I was bought, asking “How much did the nuclear industry pay you?” My response was, “No, I’m not bought yet, but I’m trying my best to get bought”—not only AAEA but also the African-American community. We *want* to be bought. As a matter of fact, I want the African-American community and African-American entrepreneurs to be equity owners of new nuclear power plants. We want to get in every aspect of the nuclear industry, from the mining and milling of uranium, to the fabrication of the fuel, to the building and ownership of the power plants, to the transportation of the nuclear waste, to the operation of Yucca Mountain, to the conversion of plutonium and high-enriched uranium from warheads into commercial nuclear fuel. Yes, I want to be bought. I’ll tell this to the nuclear industry. I want AAEA to be a multimillion-dollar, multinational organization just like the other environmental organizations. So, yes, I am looking to be bought.

*I suspect the environmental groups would say they’re in it for the “cause” rather than for monetary reasons.*

I know better. The current environmental movement is a \$6.4-billion industry.

*So AAEA supports nuclear power because of both the environmental and financial benefits it can afford the black community?*

Of course, because it makes sense. Nuclear power is scientifically, economically, and environmentally the green solution in a global warming world. If we combine our support of nuclear power with electric vehicles, it can solve a lot of problems. If we can get a lot of hybrids and electric cars being powered by nuclear power and using nuclear power to convert to a hydrogen economy in the future, we could reduce smog in the cities, reduce our reliance on imported oil, reduce global warming, and we could convert the nuclear warhead plutonium and high-enriched uranium into a commercial nuclear fuel. Pick any one of those and it’s head over heels a benefit. Nuclear is the green power of choice.

*How does AAEA get along with other minority-based environmental organizations, such as the National Hispanic Environmental Council?*

We work closely with the National Hispanic Environmental Council, but they don’t support nuclear power. We’re working with them now, trying to get the envi-

ronmental community to desegregate. AAEA is perceived by the environmental community as a renegade and traitor. We’re also seen that way on any number of other issues, such as urban development. At that point I was willing to accept the renegade label from them.

*Are you aligned with other minority-based organizations that support nuclear power?*

The majority of the Congressional Black Caucus supported Yucca Mountain. The American Association of Blacks in Energy supports nuclear power. These are two large, representative minority organizations that are going the way of AAEA. So, the question I ask myself is, “Who should AAEA listen to—Greenpeace or the Congressional Black Caucus?” That’s a no-brainer.

*From the AAEA Web site: “The environmental movement’s complete refusal to even consider a black perspective on 99 percent of environmental issues—they compartmentalize black concerns under environmental justice and leverage it to accomplish their own goals—represents a segregationist policy philosophy.” You also accuse them of establishing “environmental Jim Crow laws.” That’s some pretty strong stuff.*

And I support it. The dogma of the environmental community is set in concrete. But when it comes into the black community, there is going to be trouble. The environmentalists try to hand down the law from on high, without even a consideration of what black people think. The environmentalists think they already have the truth, the way, and the knowledge. They’re not even willing to consider a different perspective. I think nuclear power is a good example of that in a global warming world. The environmentalists don’t have to come out and embrace nuclear power the way I have, as an emission-free benefit. But at least they could say it would be unreasonable to perhaps shut down the entire industry.

I’ve challenged my environmental colleagues. “Give me baseload,” I tell them. Let that be my mantra. That is my main weapon against Greenpeace and Public Citizen. The fact is, they cannot answer the question.

*What do they tell you?*

Solar and wind. But, when I ask, “Where is my baseload on a windless night, where are my electrons?” their answer is, “Uh, uh, the grid!” The grid is not magical. Those electrons don’t get on there by magic. Something has to be running 24 hours a day, 365 days a year putting electrons on that. Give me baseload.

Then they try to tell me “distributed generation.” I blow that out of the water. I say it could come from a smart grid—but we don’t have a smart grid in this country. The

bottom line is that they don't know how to replace the baseload power. So where will it come from? It's disingenuous to not be able to answer that question.

*So you're saying they have no solutions, only complaints.*

That is correct. And with my energy background, I know their tricks and games. But they know that they don't have to provide electricity to the public. Instead, they have the luxury of saying things that don't make sense. But, at the end of the day, they still have to answer that question: Where is my baseload on a windless night? I tell them, "You don't have to stop monitoring nuclear power. I want you to monitor the nuclear industry. Go to all the public hearings. Complain. Look over their shoulders. But admit that emission-free electricity generation is good and back off trying to shut them down." And don't say solar and wind are baseload sources of power.

*But, probably, a good portion of the general public doesn't know what baseload is.*

Part of my challenge is to explain what baseload is, to explain energy, to explain it legitimately, especially to my community. The last thing African Americans need is disinformation. Meanwhile, the environmentalists run a disinformation campaign. It's illegitimate and it's illogical.

I realize that nuclear currently provides 20 percent of baseload, with most of the rest coming from coal. If we can stop their attack on nuclear, they'll rightly go after coal. As a chronic acute asthmatic in an urban area, I am scared of coal-fired plants. Under the current regulatory atmosphere, they're probably not going to scrub those old coal-fired plants. Nuclear solves all those clean-air problems cleanly and efficiently. I'm trying to push the nuclear industry to get close to 50 percent nuclear generation and 50 percent coal for baseload electricity.

There also is natural gas, but that's not a good baseload source. That's a "Cadillac" fuel, fine for peaking, but I'm not worried about peaking. I'm worried about baseload.

*The AAEA Web site says there is racism in the employment practices of the environmental movement. Could you explain that?*

Certainly. I've worked in the environmental community for 24 years. I have a report that states the statistics for employment of blacks and Hispanics in the environmental community; the percentage for blacks is 6 percent. My observation is that 95 percent of the 6 percent are administrative staff—secretaries, receptionists, etc. The environmental organizations just don't hire black professionals, for the most part. They usually have one black person on staff. In 1979, I was the only black profes-

sional in the entire Washington-based environmental community. In a city like Washington, D.C., how could they not have black professionals on staff? It must go to their policy positions and the hostile environments in their workplaces.

It also is interesting the fact that the environmentalists seem to carefully pick their battles. I live in Prince Georges County in Maryland, the richest black county in the country, but the poorest county in this region. There isn't any development here because a number of groups fight any projects that are brought to the table. I worked with Gov. Parris Glendening on the "Smart Growth" program in Maryland, but the environmentalists fought development projects such as National Harbor in Prince Georges or the expansion of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. What I found interesting was that they didn't oppose the massive development in northern Virginia, where many of them live. It seems that all of America's corporate might is building up out there. It's exploding even now. And the fact is that we need that same explosive growth over here in the black community.

So when they come into Maryland's urban areas fighting nonpolluting projects, it upsets me. Certainly, I would fight a garbage-burning plant right in the heart of a black community. But if it's a retail commercial development, for example, I don't

see what argument the environmentalists might have. They claim that a commercial development damages the environment, that sprawl is bad and it damages everything. But why don't they protest that corporate development in their own communities?

AAEA did the first comprehensive pollution report on our nation's capitol called "Our Unfair Share: A Survey of Pollution Sites in Washington, D.C." I've done the analyses looking for pollution. For example, chemical production causes pollution, but I don't see it coming from shopping malls. So, the lack of economic development in the African-American community is a huge problem that environmentalists don't recognize. Sure, it's easy for them to fight a toxic waste site in a black community, but they won't go to the other side and support an economic development project.

*It also says on your Web site that the environmental groups provide "theoretical support" to solar and wind, but oppose these same development projects in the real world. True?*

Yes. They are opposing wind farms now in Cape Cod and in Maryland. They oppose them from the standpoint of endangered species—Migratory Bird Treaty Act—and because it will spoil the scenery.

*So, as someone who has worked for an antinuclear group, what do you think they would say their power generation would realistically come from?*

That's the problem. They don't care about that part of the equation because they don't have to provide it—all they do is oppose. The same thing would happen, by the way, if it were photovoltaics we were talking about instead of nuclear. We would have to pave over the size of a city to fuel the photovoltaics, and the environmentalists would be the first ones out there saying that it's "anti open space." I know the game the environmentalists play and it's disingenuous at a real working level. Frankly, in the black community, we don't have time for those elitist games. We're trying to survive and we need real solutions that benefit the community. That's why I relish the battle at this point in my life.

*Is AAEA supported in this effort?*

We are the only environmentalist organization in the United States openly supporting nuclear power. I'm not saying that all members and participants of AAEA support nuclear power, but I challenged my board to refute my arguments. When they realized they couldn't, they gave me the approval I needed to go forward.

*What is AAEA's position on the locating of fuel enrichment facilities?*

A few years ago, an organization wanted to locate such a facility in Louisiana, and

the environmental groups got the local population to rally against it. That was in Homer, La. Right now, USEC and LES are both talking about establishing new fuel enrichment facilities. Because we support nuclear power, we support uranium enrichment. But we need to do more research before we can support what LES is proposing and what USEC is doing.

*What about spent fuel transportation?*

We think it can be done safely. It has been done safely. The new fuel has been shipped to the plants safely, so we figure they can ship the used fuel out safely. There have been thousands of shipments without an accident. In the future, there will be a minor accident, but it won't hurt anything. It's almost a disservice for some antinuclear groups to be fanning the flames of panic that terrorists might attack these things. I bet the antis are going to try to publish the routes—anything to shut down the nuclear industry.

What we are promoting is reprocessing. We started the Nuclear Fuels Reprocessing Coalition. We're out in front of the nuclear industry on that—way out front. That will reduce the amount of product filling up Yucca Mountain. We believe there should be a massive reprocessing facility at Yucca Mountain.

*What is AAEA's position on fuel reprocessing?*

I believe the MOX (mixed oxide) program is really important. We need to make plutonium from warheads and high-enriched uranium from warheads—an almost priceless commodity that no terrorists could use as a weapon against one of our U.S. cities. I could almost support nuclear power based on that—a productive use of a formerly destructive material.

*What about positions on other noncarbon forms of electricity generation—i.e., wind, solar, etc.?*

We aggressively support photovoltaic and wind power as a supplemental source of energy. We believe that will also help in establishing a smart grid—what's called an E-grid—a computerized grid that can speak back so that we will know when to input energy. We marry our support for solar and wind with the national grid. We need a national grid to get rid of the congestion in different corridors. We need a revolutionary new grid much as the computer has evolved. We need a smart grid that can take in solar and wind. What I love

about it is that it's emission-free, just like nuclear.

*Does AAEA have programs to increase African-American students' participation in university nuclear engineering programs?*

We do not at the current time, and that is a function of money. We're probably the poorest environmental organization in the country. We would love to get support to start such a program, especially at historically black colleges such as Tennessee State University, where we are advising them on LES's proposed uranium enrichment plant in that state.

What we believe is that if we start building new nuclear power plants, it will help in

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this regard because there will be a need for more nuclear engineers, black and white, to build and run the plants. That's why we're trying to get out here and push the building of more plants, frankly as fast as we can.

*How is your organization perceived by African Americans who are not members of AAEA? Nuclear power is supported by the Bush administration. Are African Americans saying you're in bed with the administration?*

They're really not saying anything. I don't think nuclear power is on the radar screen of the black community because most people haven't examined it. Like me previously, they listen to people who they consider to have their best interests at heart and take their word for it. My job is to educate the black community.

I'm looking at working with the Bush administration and the Republicans in Congress to pass an environmental justice act of 2003. AAEA started an environmental justice coalition in 2002 to get this act passed. I've already met with Senate staff and House staff on the various committees. I'm encouraged that great legislation will come out of the Bush administration. The best environmental laws this country has ever passed were passed under Republican administrations—the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and Endangered Species Act—and the Environmental Protection Agency was created. I see great opportunities with this administration. ■