

“WE NEED COURAGE”

UCS SCIENTISTS ON THE NEXT 50 YEARS

On the organization’s 50th anniversary, five UCS experts sit down for a wide-ranging discussion about the work that lies ahead and the importance of seeking just and equitable solutions.

EDITOR’S NOTE: As part of our series of Catalyst features highlighting the Union of Concerned Scientists’ 50th anniversary, we convened a group of experts from across the organization to share their thoughts about the future. The panel discussion, held in our Washington, DC, office on June 4, included: Astrid Caldas, senior climate scientist in the UCS Climate and Energy Program; Richard Ezike, who just completed a two-year stint as a UCS Kendall Fellow in the Clean Vehicles Program and is moving to a new position as senior policy associate, Innovation for Inclusion, at the Urban Institute; Gretchen Goldman, research director in the Center for Science and Democracy at UCS; Julie McNamara, senior energy analyst in the UCS Climate and Energy Program; and Ricardo Salvador, director of the UCS Food and Environment Program. Seth Shulman, UCS editorial director, moderated the discussion.

SETH SHULMAN: To kick things off, let me ask each of you: in the decade ahead, what UCS work do you see as most pressing and essential? Given all that’s happening with clean energy, Julie, let’s start with you.

JULIE MCNAMARA: On the renewable energy front, we’ve started to see some impressive progress at the state level and at the city level in some places. But bottom up isn’t always enough, so we need to push for more at the federal level. We’ve started to see coal coming offline in record numbers; that’s economics, and that’s a start. But the transition away from coal has a very hard, challenging effect on people, on communities,





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SENIOR ENERGY ANALYST,
UCS CLIMATE AND ENERGY PROGRAM

the loss of the tax base, the loss of good jobs. We certainly don’t want to set ourselves up for similar losses with natural gas, so stemming an overreliance on natural gas is the single most important thing for UCS to focus on at this juncture. Longer-term, though, given the scale and urgency of the climate crisis, I think the biggest thing we need to do is shift our thinking from incremental to transformative.

RICARDO SALVADOR: Yes. With regard to food and the environment, we need to do nothing less than change who we are, how we behave, and how we relate to the planet and its resources. We often say we are seeking to reform the system to make it healthy, green, fair, and affordable. For example, if we want a fair food system, we need to recognize the value of labor. Today, we have a US food system that is literally descended from slavery, that is still 95 percent controlled by white people, and that values the rights and the enrichment of large landowners and capital owners but not of labor.

To create a system that treats labor with dignity, we need to address things such as immigration policy. We have an immigration policy right now that essentially says to the labor force for agriculture that we want their labor but we don’t want *them*. And that’s a xenophobic, racist policy. So that means we need to work to reform that view. I don’t think most Americans believe they live in that sort of society, or want to sanction it. Paying people the fair value of their work, according to some estimates, would increase the price of our food by about a dollar a day. If we’re not willing to pay that \$360 more on an annual basis, then we don’t believe in all the things we say that we believe as a country in terms of equal opportunity and the dignity of human lives. So, UCS has a role to play in making these connections visible.

SETH SHULMAN: The Center for Science and Democracy at UCS has catalogued more than 100 abuses of science

committed by the Trump administration thus far. Gretchen, let me ask you: what do you see as the top steps UCS needs to take in the years ahead to rebuild scientific integrity in our decisionmaking processes?

GRETCHEN GOLDMAN: The Trump administration’s actions have brought to light a lot of vulnerabilities in the system we didn’t know existed. We now have an administration that doesn’t care about following process or using science, or even making it look like they are using science. We’re seeing the places where science isn’t protected and the impacts of that on everyday people, from the food we eat to the water we drink and the products we use. But we’re also seeing that we cannot protect science unless we have a functioning democracy. In the near term, we need to tackle that by fixing problems in our democracy that have come to light. The US House of Representatives has already passed HR1, a sweeping bill that would address a lot of the corruption and democracy issues that we’ve seen in the Trump era. So that’s a start.

The other big category I’d like UCS to continue to focus on is the fact that we know communities of color and low-income communities bear a higher burden from a lot of this administration’s environmental rollbacks. I would like to see UCS address the vast inequities we face in who has access to clean air and clean water and democratic representation. I want to see us show up for racial justice and social justice issues, and to be clear about who’s being impacted when science is sidelined and democracy is sidelined. I want to see us using our voice from the position of power and privilege that scientists have in our society. We should be using that to sound the alarm when we see inequities, and working to address them in everything we do.

ASTRID CALDAS: Yes. We have been talking increasingly about that common thread of equity and how differently

people are affected. I’ve been going to talk to a lot of people in these communities. And they really are facing the direct impacts of climate change right on their doorsteps. If we’re really going to address these issues of equity the way UCS tackles other issues, I think the organization needs more social scientists on staff. They can help us measure how some communities are differentially impacted, and I think social scientists have lots of great ideas about what we can do to change the system too. Building this kind of social science work into our efforts at UCS can help us go beyond just talking about these issues and move toward this equity goal in a meaningful way, planning solutions and charting our progress.

SETH SHULMAN: Thanks, Astrid. Before moving on, I want to make sure we hear from Richard about transportation priorities.

RICARDO EZIKE: Well, transportation is now the largest generator of climate emissions, surpassing the power sector a few years ago. So if we’re really going to tackle climate change, we need to look at transportation emissions, and that means looking at land use—where people are living, where housing is being built—to ensure we don’t exacerbate the issues we’re already facing today when it comes to transportation emissions. It’s very challenging because where we move, where we go, and where we live—they’re all interconnected and a lot of our choices are very ingrained in our way of living.

Today, for example, 85 percent of all US commuters drive by themselves. UCS needs to think about how we change that narrative to understand that, yes, it’s convenient, but it’s detrimental in so many ways. We’re actively involved in electrifying our transportation fleet and fighting for strong

fuel economy standards—these are vitally important. But looking ahead, we need to think as broadly as we can about how these issues intersect, including the issue of public transit. Historically, in the United States we have not invested in public transit the way our counterparts in Europe and Asia have. They invest billions of dollars. They have high taxes in order to invest in public transit because they know they just can’t clog all these cars on the roads. Shifting that narrative, shifting that investment, and really engaging people to think about our choices for cleaner modes of transit beyond the car will help us grow and prosper.

SETH SHULMAN: I’m struck by the breadth and complexity of these systemic changes many of you are calling for. What does UCS need to accomplish this work?

GRETCHEN GOLDMAN: I’d say we need the courage. We need to be able to be comfortable working on these issues, and thinking bigger than we historically have. It isn’t that many of these issues are so far removed from our work. If we look at it, they’ve been there the whole time in many ways. We just haven’t always focused on them. So I feel like there’s a lot we can do if we choose to and if we’re open to new partnerships and some new priorities. I think we’ve started to get there in recognizing a lot of these intersectional issues and understanding that UCS has a unique position of leading with the science. I think we can use that for even more good than we have in the past by putting it to work on these bigger issues.

RICARDO SALVADOR: I agree we need to have the courage to ask those sorts of questions. We came up with this system



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UCS FOOD AND ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM

of science to try to make sure that claims we make about the physical world are independently verifiable. We've developed it to make sure we don't fool ourselves. But the key thing to understand is that, because it is a human activity, science is susceptible to human bias, especially in the questions we ask.

For example, a lot of agricultural scientists see pesticides as a tremendous advancement because they've spared a lot of

all of you at this table on different projects already. And I think it's something that'll continue to happen more and more.

RICHARD EZIKE: Yes. I think the Green New Deal has really put a similar perspective into a lot of people's minds about what's needed to move to a carbon-free economy. And I know we've already started a lot of work on that end.



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RESEARCH DIRECTOR,
CENTER FOR SCIENCE AND DEMOCRACY AT UCS

drudgery and manual labor in the field. But farm laborers are some of the biggest advocates of organic agriculture because they don't want to be exposed to that stuff. Epidemiologically, they're the most susceptible to cancers that are related to these very potent chemicals we've created to protect crops against pests. Not surprisingly, they tend to see science and scientists as bad actors because they see them serving the interests of Dow and Bayer and all the companies that develop those chemicals. And when they raise objections, they tend to be framed as if they're anti-science or anti-progress, when they're really about safety and well-being for their families. So, to build a more equitable system, we need to think about the damage these chemicals do to people who actually work in those fields.

JULIE MCNAMARA: Related to that idea of seeing the bigger picture, one thought I have is that, while the climate crisis is incredibly trying, it also presents a real opportunity. Within UCS, I see that the issue of climate change is bringing together our different programs. I think I've collaborated with almost

Maybe working with each other we can look at how we incorporate land use, and think about possibilities like urban farming. That's an example of an issue that comes from this kind of intersection: another way of providing food in an environment where we're constrained by land.

ASTRID CALDAS: I'm excited by these kinds of opportunities but I do want to add one thing. I was on a panel once where one of the panelists, William Brangham from *PBS NewsHour*, was talking about the Montreal Protocol—the effort to protect the ozone layer—and he noted that a major factor in how well it worked was because chemicals existed at the time as a substitute for the bad stuff that was causing the ozone hole. He said his mom used to use hairspray. She didn't want to get rid of her “big hair” hairstyle and yet she could get the same result with something that was not damaging the environment. So I always think about that: what is the alternative we can offer when it comes to low-emissions solutions? We need to think about this because people are more amenable to change if they don't see it as a threat to their lifestyle.

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GRETCHEN GOLDMAN: I think that's right, but the other piece to note is that many of the issues we need to address involve much more than personal action alone. I think UCS has a big role to play in showing who is really responsible for the set of choices we have, and for holding decisionmakers and companies accountable. In other words, it's not just about whether or not I use a plastic straw—it's about “Why did companies create a system of disposable plastic?” We should be holding accountable the people in power that make those kinds of decisions and have the power and capital to change them.

JULIE MCNAMARA: The good news is, I think UCS is well positioned to address so many different aspects of the challenge, how it crosses certainly the power sector, transportation. When you bring multiple sectors together, it helps get you back to the fact that people live in that intersection. When you bring these different perspectives together, you get a much fuller picture. I certainly think that is an opportunity that will make our work better in our efforts to decarbonize the power sector.

ASTRID CALDAS: You know, UCS was really kind of a dream job for me, not just because of the credibility and reputation that UCS has across the board, but because it is a place that has the guts to address these issues. I think we're saying here that it doesn't hurt to have even more guts and I agree that we need to be more on the offensive than we have been in recent times. I mean, there's so much defensive stuff to do that we sometimes forget how important it is for us to help set the agenda.

SETH SHULMAN: That seems like a great note to end on. Thank you all—for your ideas and for all your amazing work.

JULIE MCNAMARA: I feel like there's so much more to say. I could keep talking with you all for hours.

GRETCHEN GOLDMAN: I feel energized. We should have planned to take some kind of action after a discussion like this—maybe joined a march or something? {C}



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