

Press Release No. 40/2010

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Trailblazer for the environment in Germany

Profile: Founding President of Federal Environment Agency, Prof. Dr. Heinrich Freiherr von Lersner, turns 80

His lifework is virtually equivalent to the concept of ecology. Heinrich Freiherr von Lersner was one of the first figures to shape German environmental policy. In 1970, the administrative lawyer with a PhD took charge of the newly established division of water and waste management within the department of environmental protection at the Federal Ministry of Interior. Four years later he was appointed first president of the Federal Environment Agency (UBA), and in that position, from 1974 to 1995, he worked to establish UBA as a reputable scientific public office which plays a significant role in shaping environmental policy. Heinrich von Lersner celebrates his 80th birthday today.

“UBA and German environmental politics got lucky with Heinrich von Lersner. With Swabian perseverance and indisputable expertise he took a stand on topics where tempers ran high, such as a speed limit on motorways, the hole in the ozone layer, forest damage, or dioxin. In so doing he helped to make environmental protection one of the core policy areas in today’s arena,” said UBA President Jochen Flasbarth. Certain milestones in German environmental politics, for example the Ordinance on Large Firing Installations, the catalytic converter concept, or the changes in waste and sewage management would not have been possible without the scientific groundwork done by UBA and Lersner’s strong leadership. The Agency was founded through the Establishment Law on 22 July 1974 in what was then West Berlin.

“Heinrich von Lersner has shown both prudence and courage in the difficult balancing act between science and politics that UBA must cope with in its dual function as both a public office and a scientific institution. It is a combination of excellence and competence that distinguishes von Lersner and which made him the successful UBA President he was,” said Flasbarth. He gave high priority to interdisciplinary communication and cooperation. Von Lersner recognised early on that environmental protection is a multisectoral task and for whom it was always important that the biologist work at the same site as the engineer, legal expert or economist. As managing director he always sought dialogue with Agency staff, demanded a large measure of motivation and commitment from them, and could be won over by good arguments.

“Environmental politics is about drilling holes in thick planks. One mustn’t stop if the drill bit doesn’t go through the plank on the first try,” said von Lersner, quoting Max Weber during an interview in the late 1980s. Heinrich von Lersner was born in Stuttgart on 14 July 1930 and studied law in Tübingen and Kiel. He graduated from the German University of Administrative Sciences Speyer in 1957, and got his doctorate with Günter Dürig, a prestigious lawyer, two years later in Tübingen. From 1959-1961, he worked as an administrative lawyer for the administration of the state of Baden-Württemberg.

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During his tenure as an official at the Federal Ministry of Interior from 1961-1974, his work focused on designing the first ordinance on waste in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Waste law has been and continues to be one of the hobby horses which he rides as both publisher and commentator. In honour of the jubilarian, UBA is dedicating a scientific treatise on a current waste law topic, *Maßnahmen gegen Elektroschrott-Exporte* [Measures to counteract export of waste electronics and electrical waste], which will be published in the *AbfallR - Zeitschrift für das Recht der Abfallwirtschaft* periodical in autumn.

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