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Activists Infiltrate ECO:nomics, Briefly Rainforest Action Network Sneaks Into Conference, Confronts Archer Daniels Midland Exec

By Matt Kettmann

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Credit: Genesis Photos

In a morning punctuated by H. Lee Scott, the chief of Wal-Mart, admitting “we are not green” and Andrew Liveris, head of Dow Chemical, saying that he expects a worse American economy than had been predicted just three months ago, the on-stage excitement level of the Wall Street Journal’s “ECO:nomics” conference seemed hard to top on Thursday, March 13. But then again, no one expected that the Rainforest Action Network would show up to make the biggest commotion.

The activist group managed to sneak its way into the conference’s main ballroom — a room off-limits even to many of us in the press — by dressing nicely and looking official. And then, during the question and answer session between the audience and featured speakers Robert Lukefahr of BP Alternative Energy-North America and Patricia Woertz of agricultural/biofuels corporation Archer Daniels Midland, RAN’s Brihannala Morgan pounced.

After introducing herself — which, even on a video feed here in the press room, seemed to take a bit of breath out of the roomful of multinational execs — Morgan confronted Woertz on ADM’s support of alleged deforestation in the Amazon to make way for palm and soy oil plantations. According to RAN, which distributed information via email following the demonstration, the growth of biofuel plantations in tropical regions is contributing to, rather than helping, the world’s greenhouse gas emission problems. Morgan tried to present Woertz with 600 signatures of schoolchildren in the United States opposing ADM’s projects, but was blocked. “It’s important for people to hear the facts about biofuels,” said Begley in a press release later in the day. “Consumers don’t want fuels that produce more greenhouse gas emissions than petroleum, and

they deserve to know what they're getting." (More on RAN's position on ADM can be seen here .)

Woertz — with the adept help of the Wall Street Journal's online executive editor Alan Murray, who's moderating most of the conference—took the incident in stride and barely seemed flustered. After Murray urged Morgan to be quiet so that Woertz could address the critique, Woertz explained that for the energy demands predicted by 2015, palm oil is a potentially major contributor. BP's Lukefahr also jumped into the debate, explaining, "We as an industry are trying to balance the needs of human beings around the world to get economic benefits and a sustainable lifestyle."

As Morgan and her cohorts kept up their pestering, Murray termed the demonstration a "pretty common little display," and said politely but sternly, "We're happy to have you here, but please take your seats like everyone else." Reportedly, Morgan and the rest of the RAN activists were waiting outside for Woertz to present the signatures, but the ADM CEO took an alternate route.

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