

COMMENTARY

Editor in Chief:
 Michael J. Kleckner
 Managing Editor:
 Jessica Richelderfer
 Editorial Page Assistant:
 Salena De La Cruz

Tuesday, April 22, 2003

Earth Day 2003: White House fights environmental laws

Guest commentary

As we celebrate the 33rd anniversary of Earth Day, Americans should be proud for many reasons.

We live in the country that created the very idea of national parks as well as myriad environmental protections to ensure our access to clean air, water and food. We cherish and find respite in the beauty of our vast land from coast to coast.

Why, then, is the Bush administration systematically dismantling the laws designed to protect the health of the environment and of all Americans? How can this unraveling of rights occur in our country while the administration claims to promote freedom and democracy abroad?

It is this disconnect between President Bush's rhetoric regarding the Middle East and his lack of efforts to protect our citizens at home that has created his greatest credibility gap. A quick review of recent policy changes points to the staggering — and dangerous — nature of the environmental rollbacks put in place by this administration.

Take air pollution. Just as some of the nation's oldest and dirtiest power plants were about to be forced to reduce the amount of pollutants they emit, the Bush administration let them off the hook with a deceiving piece of legalese called the Clear Skies Initiative.

What about our pristine national forests? In the name of "healthy forests" and "fire prevention," the Forest Service has proposed nearly unlimited clear-cutting of forests. Long-standing mandates for public input and environmental review would be eliminated.

Isn't clean water a necessity? Yet the Environmental Protection Agency has announced plans to reduce the number of wetlands and waterways protected by the Clean Water Act. This came on the heels of an earlier announcement that would essentially overlook the immense water pollution problems caused by millions of tons of untreated animal waste being poured into our waterways and drinking water from big factory farms.

Even whales are at risk. The Bush administration has proposed exemptions for the Department of Defense that will allow continued use of the Navy's new low frequency sonar that can kill marine mammals by shattering their eardrums.

And though there is plenty of talk about homeland security, the Bush administration has blocked efforts to require thousands of chemical and nuclear plants to become more secure.

Furthermore, while President Bush openly worries about instability in the Middle East, all measures to make the U.S. less dependent on oil — for example through increased auto fuel efficiency or the Kyoto Protocol — have been stopped dead in their tracks.

So why aren't we all well aware of this war being waged against the environment?

Federal agencies with authority over environmental programs are working in a coordinated effort to help oil, coal, logging, mining, chemical and auto companies promote their short-term profits at the expense of our health and our public lands.

The bitter irony of this administration is that the patriotic language it has used to wage war on another nation seems desperately out of place here at home. Our water, food, forests, air and oceans are at risk.

In turn, so are the futures of our families, our livelihoods and our personal health. In its efforts to promote a brighter horizon for those suffering abroad, the Bush administration should take a look first in its own backyard. What better day than Earth Day.

John Passacantando is the executive director of Greenpeace USA. More information is at www.greenpeaceusa.org. © 2003, Greenpeace USA. Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services.

Earth Day 2003: U.S. benefits from technological advances

Guest commentary

From childhood we are told that the only certainties in life are death and taxes. Unfortunately, this list is incomplete: the other thing we can really count on with mathematical certainty are predictions of impending environmental disaster, loudly proclaimed by activists at events marking Earth Day. This year's April 22 commemoration will be no exception.

Expect to read and hear what Danish statistician Bjorn Lomborg, author of the best-selling "The Skeptical Environmentalist," has called the "Litany."

By the Litany, Lomborg means the never-ending predictions of environmental doom brought about by man's insatiable appetite to devour the planet's resources to the point of their depletion. But as Lomborg and other skeptics point out, those claims are not backed up by any available evidence.

As the world's leading economic power, the United States has, over the last century,

transformed itself from a predominantly agricultural society to an industrial powerhouse.

Like Europe and Japan, it has made creative use of industrial chemicals to do such things as purify drinking water, develop life-sustaining pharmaceuticals and medical instruments, and protect crops from deadly infestation. Thanks to modern vaccines, diseases such as cholera, malaria, typhoid fever and smallpox, which regularly ravaged the generation of our grandparents, have all but disappeared from the United States and other industrialized nations.

The most deplorable environmental conditions — filthy air indoors and outdoors, dirty drinking water, dread diseases running rampant — are to be found in poverty-stricken developing countries, where people lack access to modern technology and affordable energy. Real pollution is rapidly disappearing from industrial societies, but it is commonplace in sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and other places devoid of the fruits of modern technology.

Meanwhile, according to figures released annually by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the quality of the air, water and other natural resources in this country continues to make dramatic improvements, as new, cleaner technologies replace older ones.

EPA and Environment Canada, for example, have announced that levels of the "most critical, persistent pollutants" around the Great Lakes continued to drop in 2002. The Duluth News-Tribune recently reported that the declines continue a 15-year trend. On the U.S. side, mercury releases have declined 40 percent since 1990, hexachlorobenzene emissions have fallen by 75 percent, and dioxin releases are down 92 percent from the late 1980s.

Are there flies in the environmental ointment? Yes, and most of them come courtesy of the environmental movement. Environmental groups such as Greenpeace, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Health Care Without Harm, and the Environmental Working Group regularly launch scare campaigns — conspicuously lacking in credible data — against industrial chemicals whose use has contributed mightily to Americans living longer, healthier lives.

Environmental activists demanding reductions in man-made emissions of greenhouse gases from the burning of fossil fuels because of their alleged effect on "global warming" threaten to deny Americans continued access to affordable energy.

A good case can be made for sound environmental policy, but don't expect to hear it from the organizers of Earth Day.

Bonner R. Cohen is a senior fellow at the Lexington Institute. He can be contacted at cohen@lexingtoninstitute.org. © 2003, Lexington Institute. Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services.



Earth Day 2003: We should focus on world's clean water supply

Guest commentary

After spending \$2 for a bottle of spring water at the local convenience store, you may be surprised to learn that people living in Nairobi, Kenya, pay up to five times more per liter of water than the typical American citizen.

Clean, drinkable freshwater, though essential for life, is not easily accessible to everyone. Water demand is increasing three times as fast as the world's population. In less than 25 years, 30 percent of the world will face water shortages. On this year's Earth Day, we should focus on freshwater.

Although water makes up 70 percent of the earth's surface, less than 1

percent of the world's freshwater is fit for consumption, according to the World Health Organization. Five million people — equivalent to the entire population of Maryland — die each year of diseases caused by contaminated water, such as cholera, typhoid and chronic diarrhea.

Global warming is adversely affecting the world's freshwater supply. Less snow in the mountains results in less water for our global faucets.

Shortsighted water policies are also at fault, especially the move toward privatizing water systems.

In California, privatizing energy resulted in blackouts, skyrocketing bills and billions in lost public funds. What would happen if private companies gained a greater part of our water supply?

Against these alarming trends, there is a global movement working to turn the tide toward water conservation and sustainability. Since my family foundation began awarding an international environmental prize more than 10 years ago, we've recognized 87 grassroots activists from 55 nations who are taking courageous action to ensure that water — a basic human right — remains protected from the voracious interests of polluting industries and compromised government officials.

This year's Goldman Prize winners are no exception.

Julia Bonds, a coal miner's daughter from West Virginia, is battling the coal industry's practice of mountaintop removal coal mining, which has buried 1,000 miles of Appalachian

streams with tons of debris and poisoned watersheds with arsenic, mercury and lead.

Spanish economist Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, another of this year's prize winners, led 400,000 people in a march in Barcelona against the government's \$25 billion plan to build a series of dams along the Ebro River, the nation's last free-flowing river. Arrojo is campaigning for alternatives, including planting drought-tolerant crops, repairing leaking pipes and implementing water recycling programs.

We can ensure fresh water for all if we continue to stabilize the Earth's climate by reducing carbon emissions. We must move away from mega-dams toward technologies that use water most efficiently

and agriculture systems that preserve groundwater for our children's children.

We must hold our governments responsible for drafting and enforcing sustainable and equitable water usage policies, and hold industry accountable for abiding by them. And we must do our part as individuals to conserve water in our daily activities.

As we celebrate Earth Day, let's make it our goal to uphold the basic right to clean water.

Richard N. Goldman is the president of the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund and the Goldman Environmental Prize. He can be contacted at pmproj@progressive.org. © 2003, Richard N. Goldman. Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services.