

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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Is the Environmental Protection Agency Here to Help Us?

Last month, I mentioned that the Bush administration insists the Environmental Protection Agency (E.P.A.) does not have the power to limit greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide and other emissions causing global warming) because they are not “air pollutants” under the Clean Air Act. Twelve states are challenging the administration by filing a suit against the E.P.A. Over the past few decades there have been several other instances where outside forces caused the E.P.A. to take action, or in some cases inaction, that was not in the best interest of the public.

An example is the unreasonable amount of time it took to remove lead from gasoline. It was in the 1960s when physicians discovered that lead was killing many children and crippling the brains of many others. The Clean Air Act was signed at the end of 1970 and early the next year regulations were drafted to improve air quality, but lead was omitted from the list of concerned pollutants. Instead, EPA asked the National Academy of Science to determine whether lead was really harmful. The NAS then appointed a panel to study the problem, but this panel was already biased toward the lead-additive makers and the petroleum industry. This panel subsequently gave lead in gas a “clean bill of health”. After numerous attempts by public policy makers, it wasn't until 1985 that E.P.A. finally removed lead from all the gasoline. However, the primary reason for this action was that the pollution-control devices required in automobiles to remove three other pollutants could not work properly with leaded gas.

In 1962, the Public Health Service suggested that the E.P.A. regulate the amount of arsenic in drinking water to less than 10 parts per billion (ppb). Arsenic was known to cause heart attacks, lung cancer or bladder cancer depending on the dosage. In 1974, E.P.A. issued a law limiting arsenic in drinking water to 50 ppb, but promised to consider whether to lower the limit. Several deadlines came and went and it wasn't until a new statute and a law suit prompted the E.P.A. to announce a new arsenic limit in January 2001. Three days after the announcement, the newly elected President Bush put it and other pending agency laws on hold. Environmental groups charged that he killed the arsenic law in return for campaign contributions from big mining and smelting companies. Many months later, the president and the E.P.A. administrator announced that the drinking-water systems would have to apply to the new limit by 2006, the date originally set by the agency. However, today 5% of the population is drinking water that exceeds the new 10 ppb limit.

To make matters worse, the Bush's 2007 proposed budget includes a \$2 million cut in the E.P.A. library system. In anticipation of this budget cut, the agency's main library in Washington has already been closed to the public. In addition, the regional

libraries in Chicago, Dallas and Kansas City have been closed altogether. If you want to find out how much pollution is being generated by an industrial plant in your town, or whether any toxic chemicals are being released to a river or lake, or whether the local landfill is contaminating the groundwater, you no longer have access to this information. There is still a chance that the libraries may reopen as there is a group of 18 senators that are urging the president to rethink his budget request.

The lobby efforts of industry are not restricted to the E.P.A. as they can also affect agencies like the Department of Energy. Congress had ordered the D.O.E. to make periodic updates in efficiency standards for appliances as part of the Energy Policy and Conservation Act of 1975. The Clinton administration strengthened standards for 10 appliances, but no new standards have been issued since 2001. In fact, the Bush administration tried to weaken the standards for commercial air-conditioners under pressure from the manufacturers. Fortunately, the courts intervened to prevent the lower standards to take effect.

As concerned citizens of our environment, we must be aware of these outside pressures and counteract them as best we can. We must be in constant contact with our elected officials so they can represent us accordingly.