

Bush administration steps up war on environment

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“Excessive regulations undermine our democratic institutions, the health of our economy, and the very property rights on which our nation was founded”—*Republican Congressman Tom DeLay, House Majority Leader, to the Competitive Enterprise Institute’s Annual Dinner, May 21, 2003*

The Bush administration is pushing ahead with its agenda of gutting environmental protection at the behest of corporate interests and right-wing ideologues. This is a wide-ranging attack, which includes blatant efforts to roll back environmental protections, deliberate neglect and sabotage of existing regulations, and so-called “reform” measures aimed at obtaining big business goals through the back door.

Recent news accounts indicate that Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) efforts against polluters have been significantly cut back in the two years since Bush came to power. According to an analysis conducted by the *Sacramento Bee* (June 1, 2003), EPA inspections of businesses have decreased by 15 percent (compared to the final two years of the Clinton administration), criminal cases referred for federal prosecution have dropped 40 percent, and the amount of pollution prevented as a result of the agency’s legal actions has “plummeted to 921 million pounds, down from 7.5 billion pounds.”

The *Bee* reports that since September 11, EPA activity has been re-oriented: “Since then, many agents across the country have been dividing their time between pursuing leads on major pollution violations, working on counterterrorism efforts, and guarding [former agency administrator Christine] Whitman against possible attack. Whitman routinely traveled to speeches and meetings with an entourage of at least four armed pollution investigators, according to senior EPA agents”!

The Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility issued a press release April 29 claiming “Christie Whitman is quietly presiding over the largest enforcement rollback in agency history.... Field agents say that EPA management is not interested in investigating corporate crime; as a result, the enforcement program is dying from the roots.”

Whitman, considered by the extreme right as an “appeaser” of environmentalists, resigned from her post May 21. The Competitive Enterprise Institute, a think tank allied to the Republican right, declared that Whitman’s resignation offered the EPA a chance to choose a leader who can “bring the agency into the 21st century” (i.e., preside over its liquidation in all but name).

One of Whitman’s last actions, in the face of public outrage, was to promise that the EPA would not base certain health regulations on a calculation that the life of a person over 70 is worth less than that of a younger person. Instead of the “traditional” assumption that all lives saved from cleaner air were worth the same, Bush regulatory czar John Graham advocated valuing elderly persons’ lives at 37 percent less. This was dubbed the “Senior Death Discount” by opponents. Two Bush administration environmental studies placed a \$3.7 million value on younger peoples’ lives and \$2.3 million value on those of people 70 and older.

Graham indicated that the calculation would not be used in these particular cases, but merely because the studies were based on old data. He defended cost-benefit calculations that include “life expectancy” methods. Harvard School of Public Health’s Milton C. Weinstein, a co-thinker of Graham’s and a pioneer of such methods, derided the “equity argument that every citizen should be entitled to an equal claim on resources and shouldn’t be penalized for the fact that they’ve lived a larger portion of their life span.”

The ideological content of the attack on the EPA and the laws it is supposed to administer, such as the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act, is a combination of brutal economics (balancing the benefits of keeping people alive, on the one hand, and corporate profits, on the other) and rabid “free enterprise” arguments, full of references to the sinister “regulatory state.” The assault on environmental regulations is part of the effort by the political elite to remove restrictions on the profit drive of giant corporations. Recent cases demonstrate this graphically:

* In April, the Bush administration quietly removed 200 million acres from possible wildlife protection, opening it up to development. In one order, Interior Secretary Gale Norton declared that the government would end reviews of western and Alaskan landholdings. These areas can now be opened to mining, drilling, logging or road-building. “They are trying to declare, by fiat, that wilderness does not exist,” commented Heidi McIntosh of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. The Bush administration decision is a reversal of decades of federal wilderness policy.

The *New York Times* noted, “With a single order, the Bush administration removed more than 200 million acres from further wilderness study, including caribou stamping ground in Alaska, the red rock canyons and mesas of southern Utah, Case Mountain with its sequoia forests in California and a wall of rainbow-colored rock known as Vermillion Basin in Colorado.”

* The energy bill recently passed by the House includes the proposal to drill for oil and gas in the Arctic wildlife refuge, a favorite of the Bush administration and the oil industry.

The Senate version of the bill, in the words of one commentator, “is a compendium of tired ideas favoring the coal, oil and gas industries, including one or two ideas the House hadn’t thought of—notably a provision that would authorize oil and gas exploration in coastal waters that have been faithfully protected since the first Bush administration.”

* Bush’s appointee as deputy secretary of the interior, J. Steven Griles, is a former lobbyist for the oil, gas and mining interests he now monitors. The *Associated Press* discovered that while Griles’s nomination was pending before the Senate in 2001, Chevron, the oil giant, was paying him \$80,000 to lobby the Interior Department.

According to the *Denver Post*, “When the Bush administration set out to write a clean-air strategy, a key member of its team [Griles] needed no introduction to the energy executives across the table. They were from the

same energy companies who once paid him to lobby on clean-air rules.... When he [Griles] became deputy secretary, he joined the Clear Skies Senior Policy Group, a collection of nearly three dozen administration officials charged with helping to formulate Bush policy on air pollution. As part of that group, he met regularly with top administration officials on air-pollution strategy.”

* In the guise of responding to the risk of damaging forest fires, the House recently voted to loosen regulations and give the government the authority to thin undergrowth and trees on 20 million acres of federal land. It would provide for a speeded-up process if the measures are challenged in court and would hand over more of the work to private companies. The House bill is a backdoor measure aimed at promoting more commercial logging in national forests.

Opponents of the measure pointed out that rather than focusing efforts on clearing areas closest to homes and most at risk, the bill would permit logging “deep in the backcountry in the name of fuel reduction.” Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope remarked, “Instead of protecting communities, the House buckled to the Bush administration’s agenda, choosing to sell out America’s forests to corporate special interests and limiting the public’s right to speak out on behalf of forest protection.”

* The computer system used by the EPA to track polluters is outdated and full of faulty data, and fails to take into account thousands of significant pollution sources, a recent government report reveals. Critics note that the computer system’s faults make it possible for mining and oil industries and developers to discharge vast quantities of pollutants into US waterways undetected. Daniel Rosenberg, a lawyer for the Natural Resources Defense Council, commented, “The deliberate neglect of this project is a perfect example of the Bush administration’s effort to dismantle the Clean Water Act with as little public awareness as possible.”

* The federal government recently recommended changes to the regulation of Appalachian mountaintop coal mining in a manner that will relax standards that currently exist, to the benefit of the mining companies.

Mountaintop strip mining involves blowing off the tops of mountains to get at coal deposits. Tons of broken rock are thereby dumped into nearby valleys and streams, polluting the waterways and killing wildlife and plants. A recent Environmental Impact Study (EIS) noted that over 700 miles of Appalachian streams “have already been eliminated by valley fills” and that aquatic life forms are being harmed or killed. The EIS observed that the harm caused by this practice was far more pervasive than previously believed, yet failed to call for the curtailment of the practice. On the contrary, the Bush administration is expected to call for an easing of restrictions, arguing that a “case-by-case” approach is more flexible.

Joan Mulhern of Earthjustice said, “The administration is snugly in the pocket of the coal industry. There is no other way to explain why the administration’s policy recommendations are completely at odds with the scientific studies.”

*On May 28, the US Fish and Wildlife Service announced that it will temporarily halt the designation of land as critical habitats under the Endangered Species Act within a matter of weeks because the program has depleted its budget for the fiscal year. The Act authorizes the service to list animal and plant species as endangered or threatened, to protect them from risk and to encourage their recovery by designating areas critical to their continued existence.

Critics of the service’s announcement noted that it had not requested more money from Congress to continue financing the program. Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, commented, “They’ve engineered a budget crisis.”

Incredibly, the Fish and Wildlife Service has begun inserting “disclaimers” into critical habitat designations, which open with the

statement, “Designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to species.” Testifying before Congress last month, Assistant Interior Secretary Craig Manson, the individual who made the May 28 announcement, called critical habitat “a process that provides little real conservation benefit, consumes enormous amounts of agency resources, and imposes huge social and economic costs.”

According to Suckling, “Species with critical habitat are recovering twice as fast as those without it.” Habitat loss is the primary threat to 85 percent of endangered species.

The Bush government is attempting by various means to roll back protection for endangered species to benefit gas, oil, timber and mining interests. Rep. Richard Pombo, a California Republican, tagged on a provision to the 2004 military spending bill that would have given the Secretary of the Interior discretion over where, when and how to designate critical habitat for endangered species.

The House, on May 22, voted to exempt the Defense Department from laws designed to protect endangered animals and plants, on the grounds that the regulations hamper the military’s ability to train US troops and test weapons. According to the *Washington Post*, “The 252 to 174 vote was a victory for the Bush administration, which has spent more than a year seeking authority to sidestep regulations meant to protect endangered species, marine mammals and migratory birds that are on or near military installations.”

Encountering mild opposition in the Senate, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld complained to the press, “To the extent we are so restricted that we are unable to train, we’re going to end up sending men and women into battle without the training they need.”

The absurdity of Rumsfeld’s arguments is revealed in the case of the dispute between environmentalists and the military at Camp Pendleton, a base north of San Diego.

According to the *Post*, “[Rep. Duncan] Hunter [R.-Calif.] displayed maps on the House floor yesterday depicting the contested areas, saying there was no longer sufficient room for the Marine Corps to conduct amphibious training exercises.

“But environmentalists questioned Hunter’s assessment, noting that of all the species he identified, just one of them, the tidewater goby, took up space on training grounds. In that case the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service set aside 800 acres of land on Camp Pendleton, which encompasses 125,000 acres.”

Opponents of regulations on business argue that they hinder American corporations from being “competitive” in the world economy—in other words, that US corporations can only remain in operation to the extent that they contaminate the water and air, wantonly destroy wildlife, maim and kill workers. Indeed, this raises the obvious question as to whether an environment in which human beings, animals and vegetation can live and coexist decently is, in fact, incompatible with the continued existence of American capitalism.



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