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# Top Ten Bush Administration Environmental Misdeeds

If you judged the Bush administration's environmental initiatives by their names alone—like "Clear Skies" and "Healthy Forests"—you might conclude that the Bush team was fighting to protect our air, water, and wildlands.

But upon closer examination it becomes clear that the laws and rules the administration has enacted since taking office constitute a broad and sweeping attack on environmental protection, and payback for the campaign-trail generosity of the coal, oil, and other dirty industries. Whenever polluters' interests have collided with those of citizens, the polluters have prevailed. There is a better way.

Since the passage of the Clean Air and Water Acts in the early 1970s, we have made progress in cleaning the air we breathe, and ensuring that our rivers and lakes are safe for swimming and fishing. Our national parks and forests provide recreation areas for millions of visitors every year and habitat for thousands of species. Environmental laws have succeeded, and their benefits far outweigh their costs. A 2003 report by the White House Office of Management and Budget found that environmental standards return benefits (fewer hospital visits, lower medical costs, and work days that might otherwise have been lost) five to seven times greater than their costs.

Millions of Americans, however, still breathe unhealthy air and drink unsafe water. Technology to reduce polluting emissions is widely available and cost-effective, as are ways to reduce our dependence on polluting fuels. But the Bush administration has ignored these solutions and put polluter profit ahead of public health.

Here are ten of the most egregious examples:

## 1. Three Times More Mercury. Ten More Years.

Despite findings by the EPA and the Food and Drug Administration that mercury threatens the health of more Americans than previously believed, Bush's EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt announced a plan that would allow three times more mercury in our air and water than simply enforcing the Clean Air Act as currently written. And it would give utilities 10 years more to reach these standards. The EPA itself says we can eliminate 90 percent of the mercury from our air by 2008 by enforcing the Clean Air Act and using existing technologies.<sup>1</sup> But instead of reducing allowable mercury emissions to 5 tons before the end of the decade, the Bush plan calls for emission levels of 15 tons by 2018.

The largest source of mercury in the United States is coal-fired electric power plants. Mercury is emitted from smokestacks, and eventually reaches waterways where fish ingest it and pass it on to people who eat the fish.

The EPA estimates that one in six women of childbearing age has mercury levels in her blood high enough to put her babies at risk. That means as many as 630,000 infants are born in the U.S. every year with unsafe mercury levels—double what was previously estimated.<sup>2</sup>

"The EPA's own numbers say the Clean Air Act alone will reduce power plant emissions nearly twice as fast as Bush's new proposal," said *Time* magazine (February 25, 2002).

[sierraclub.org/mercury](http://sierraclub.org/mercury)

## 2. Polluter Pays? Not Anymore.

"You make a mess, you clean it up." That's what the Superfund law intended when President Carter signed it in 1980 to clean up the nation's worst toxic messes. But the current Bush administration has broken with more than two decades of policy and rejected the principle of "polluter pays." In 1995, taxpayers paid 18 percent of the cost of cleaning up abandoned toxic waste sites. In 2004, taxpayers will foot the entire bill.<sup>3</sup> Under the Bush administration, Superfund site cleanups have fallen to fewer than 50 sites a year compared with more than 80 sites per year during the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> One in four Americans lives within a short bicycle ride of a Superfund site.<sup>5</sup>

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## 3. More Dirty Air

The nation's oldest and dirtiest power plants were exempted from meeting pollution standards set by the Clean Air Act, but they were not allowed to expand without installing modern anti-pollution technologies like scrubbers. The Bush administration has all but eliminated this provision, called "New Source Review," allowing these polluting power plants to emit even more soot, lead, mercury, and other contaminants. This dismantling of the Clean Air Act affects 17,000 factories and power plants found in every state in the nation.<sup>6</sup> Old facilities emit up to ten times more pollution than modern ones.

New Bush administration rules would allow almost unlimited changes to be classified by plant operators as "routine maintenance"—a utility can spend up to 20 percent of the plant's cost on expansion without triggering the requirements of New Source Review. So the operators of an aging \$1 billion power plant can add approximately \$200 million worth of new generating equipment without having to install modern pollution controls. The previous level recommended by the EPA was 0.75 percent.<sup>7</sup>

The American Lung Association calls these rule changes, "the most harmful and unlawful air-pollution initiative ever undertaken by the federal government."<sup>8</sup> In *The New York Times* magazine story, "Changing All the Rules," on April 4, 2004, Bruce Barcott writes, "The administration's real problem with the new-source review program wasn't that it didn't work. The problem was that it was about to work all too well."

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## 4. Fire Up the Chainsaws

The Bush administration's so-called "Healthy Forests Initiative," which was signed into law in 2003, promises to protect communities from forest fires, but is really a gift to the logging industry, allowing the harvesting of old-growth trees deep in forests, far from affected communities. Forest Service scientists have shown that the best way to protect communities is by clearing the wooded areas located within 500 yards of homes.

The Bush administration bill calls for the thinning of 190 million acres of forest land. But according to *USA Today*, "there were only about 1.9 million acres of private and federal forestland—1 percent of the Bush ad-

ministration's estimate—that are both at high risk of fire and close enough to communities to ignite homes.” (July 2, 2003)

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said, “President Bush's so-called ‘Healthy Forests Initiative’ is anything but. The measure—purportedly designed to prevent destructive Western wildfires—does little to accomplish that task. Its real goal is to please timber companies by increasing the amount of logging in federal forests, including the southern Appalachians.” (October 20, 2003)

[sierraclub.org/forests](http://sierraclub.org/forests)

## 5. The Energy Plan: Dig, Drill, & Destroy

Hatched from the secret Cheney energy task force meetings, the Bush administration's energy bill calls for subsidies and tax credits to the coal, oil, and nuclear industries totalling in the tens of billions of dollars, but does nothing to reduce our dependence on oil. It opens coastal areas to offshore oil drilling, encourages methane drilling on land owned by farmers and ranchers, and protects the makers of the cancer-causing chemical MTBE from being prosecuted. The bill does all this without raising fuel economy standards for cars, trucks, and SUVs, without addressing problems with the nation's power grid that led to blackouts in 2003, and without making meaningful investments in renewable energy sources.

The bill has been rejected twice by the Senate, but administration allies continue to push for its passage.

In September 2003, *Vanity Fair* magazine said: “The president has made future energy needs a top priority. Unfortunately, massive drilling on public lands is deemed necessary to meet them. Inside his agencies, ‘preservation’ has become a dirty word—a word that gets your transferred if you insist on it...instead of proposing to auction mineral rights to the highest bidder.”

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## 6. Hogwash!

Despite the massive amounts of animal waste discharged into our air and water by huge factory farms operated by Tyson Chicken and other giant meat producers, the Bush administration rewrote the Clean Air Act in September 2003 so that it will not apply to such facilities. Under the new rules, developed after backroom negotiations with factory-farm representatives and without public input, factory farms will be able to continue to discharge animal waste—approximately 2.7 trillion pounds per year in all—into our rivers, streams, lakes, and air, and suffer only minimal consequences such as a \$500 fine.

[sierraclub.org/factoryfarms](http://sierraclub.org/factoryfarms)

## 7. Drilling Wilderness

Despite the fact that 63 percent of public lands in the West are already available for leasing without restrictions, the Bush administration has turned over control of an additional 5 million acres to oil and gas companies. This

includes some of the nation's most environmentally sensitive and beautiful places, like coastal Alaska, the Powder River Basin in Montana and Wyoming, and the Rocky Mountain Front. In spring 2003, the BLM approved drilling of 82,000 new oil and gas wells in the Powder River Basin alone.<sup>9</sup>

On October 13, 2003, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* said: “The Bush administration has ordered federal managers to remove regulatory obstacles to oil and gas development along the Rocky Mountain Front. It acted with no public consultation or examination of competing land use values.”

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## 8. Global Warming Put on Back Burner

During his 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush repeatedly vowed to address carbon dioxide emissions, the main compound that causes global warming, but once in office, the Bush administration has refused to set limits on the pollutant.

After dismissing the Kyoto Protocol—which was signed by 155 other nations—as flawed, the administration offered no alternatives. Then in late 2003, in response to a suit filed by the Sierra Club and other advocacy groups, the EPA acknowledged the dangers of global warming, but claimed it lacks the authority to do anything about it.

[sierraclub.org/globalwarming](http://sierraclub.org/globalwarming)

## 9. Failing to Protect Workers at Ground Zero

After 9/11, the White House instructed the EPA to hide potential health risks in lower Manhattan from the World Trade Center collapse. On September 14, the EPA sent a proposed press release to the White House, emphasizing that its tests had shown dangerous asbestos levels. Yet the Bush administration's edited version, released to the public and media on September 16, was altered to read: “Our tests show that it is safe for New Yorkers to go back to work.”

MSNBC reported that “a report by the EPA's Office of the Inspector General released on Aug. 21 states, among other criticisms, that the White House reviewed and even changed EPA statements about public health risks to make them sound less alarming.” (September 11, 2003)<sup>10</sup>

9/11 Environmental Action at [www.911ea.org](http://www.911ea.org)

## 10. The Big Bite

Every administration since Teddy Roosevelt's has left office with more lands protected than when it entered, except the current Bush administration, which has weakened protections on an incredible 234 million acres of our public land, an area equivalent to the states of Oklahoma and Texas. The administration weakened the Clinton administration's Roadless Area Conservation Rule, which protected almost 60 million acres of national forests, by exempting the Tongass and Chugach national forests in Alaska and giving governors a loophole to exempt national forests in their state.

“Assault on Wild America” at [sierraclub.org/sierra/200403](http://sierraclub.org/sierra/200403)

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**SOURCES:** 1. EPA presentation to the Edison Electric Institute, 12/4/01. 2. EPA statement released February 2004. 3. “The Truth About Toxic Waste Cleanups: How EPA is Misleading the Public About the Superfund Program,” Sierra Club and U.S. Public Interest Research Group, February 2004. 4. [epa.gov/superfund/sites/query/queryhtm/hplcl1.htm](http://epa.gov/superfund/sites/query/queryhtm/hplcl1.htm) 5. “Superfund Program: Current Status and Future Fiscal Challenges.” United States General Accounting Office. Report no. GAO-03-850. Page 1 6. 67-Federal Register 80186, 12/31/02; 68-Federal Register 61248, 10/27/03. 7. Bruce Barcott, “Changing All the Rules,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 4, 2004. 8. Clean Air Task Force: [catf.us/press\\_room/20030501-Final\\_Comments\\_on\\_Proposed\\_Rule.pdf](http://catf.us/press_room/20030501-Final_Comments_on_Proposed_Rule.pdf) 9. Powder Basin Environmental Impact Statement, 2002. 10. [msnbc.msn.com/id/3076626](http://msnbc.msn.com/id/3076626)