

SETBACKS FOR THE BUSH CLEAN AIR PLAN

(Updating *Backgrounder* No. 718, "Two Cheers for Bush's Clean Air Plan," July 10, 1989.)

When George Bush unveiled his Clean Air Act Amendment package this June, it was rightly hailed as a bold use of market mechanisms to achieve environmental objectives. With some improvement, it had the potential to become a valuable addition to federal environmental legislation. But since the bill has been taken to the back rooms of congressional committees, many of the most important Bush proposals are being weakened or scuttled. In many cases, Bush's own Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials have been more than willing to undermine the President's plan.

True to form on environmental legislation, political considerations are playing a more important role than science or economics in the debate over Clean Air Act amendments. Members of Congress are reluctant to be perceived as opposing any "environmental" proposal, no matter how expensive or ineffective the action might turn out to be. Thus instead of weighing the costs and benefits of a particular clean air proposal, lawmakers seem willing to exaggerate the benefits while ignoring the costs of compliance. This imbalance is all the more pronounced because much of the environmental debate is based upon false scientific assumptions. Thus the final legislation could damage America's economic health seriously while doing very little to improve the environment.

Among the erroneous assumptions now driving the debate over the Clean Air Act:

Assumption: "Acid rain" is a serious problem that requires an immediate reduction in sulfur dioxide emissions from major coal burning facilities.

Facts: The most thorough scientific studies to date indicate that man-made emissions of acid-forming chemicals have very little impact on the nation's lakes. In the northeast United States, where there is the most concern over acid rain, only 162 lakes (or 5 percent of the 3,227 lakes surveyed) have been identified as acidic. It appears, moreover, that many of these have been acidic since pre-industrial times, due to natural conditions of soil and surrounding vegetation. Yet federal proposals for controlling sulfur emissions may cost as much as \$4 billion each year. Even those who wish to impose this enormous cost on the economy concede that only about half of the acidic lakes would be helped. Moreover, this limited benefit would not begin to be seen for a decade or more. By contrast, treating acidic lake and stream watersheds with a natural acid neutralizer, such as limestone, would cost less than 1 percent as much, and the results would be seen immediately.

Assumption: The failure to comply with ozone emission standards endangers the health of nearly 100 million Americans.

Fact: Because of the method by which the government determines ozone “attainment” (that is, compliance with federal standards for ozone exposure), the apparent exposure rates are greatly exaggerated. Under this method, if any monitoring devices in an urban area exceed the federal standard for ozone more than three times in three years, the entire municipal region is declared a “nonattainment” area. This does not mean that every resident, or even a large minority, is exposed to an ozone level in excess of any federal standard. By the government’s own statistics, most of America easily complies with ozone standards more than 99.5 percent of the time. Only southern California regularly suffers from excessively high ozone levels. But that state already is introducing draconian control policies under the existing Clean Air Act. There is no need for a further tightening of federal requirements, since full authority for any local actions already exists. To make matters worse, Congress is considering mandatory reductions of emissions from new cars’ tailpipes. Yet over two-thirds of ozone-causing chemicals are emitted by less than one-third of the cars on the road – the older models. Placing expensive controls on new cars hits the wrong target.

Assumption: Up to 3,000 Americans die prematurely each year from exposure to toxic air emissions.

Fact: Such frightening “data” are typical of the statistics driving environmental policy in America. According to the EPA, these “risk estimates assume a 70 year lifetime of exposure to the contaminant at the maximum exposure level.” In other words, an American would need to spend 70 years breathing a particular pollutant at the peak emissions rate to be counted among the “at risk” population. Yet these inflated risk factors are still cited as a reason to support expensive regulatory control measures.



Many of the congressional proposals for dealing with acid rain will cost consumers billions of dollars each year and yet are based on highly questionable scientific assumptions. Alternative approaches, such as liming and fish stocking, offer immediate benefits at a fraction of the cost. Similarly, treating current modest levels of ozone exposure as a national concern, and imposing heavy and unnecessary costs on most Americans – while benefiting only a small segment of the population – is like cracking a walnut with a golden hammer.

Building Fresh Support. George Bush should recognize that his bold environmental proposal of the summer is being gutted by the Congress – with what seems like the collusion of his own EPA. Rather than allow further destruction of his proposals, he should be prepared to lose the bill for this year. He then should seek to build fresh support for a 1990 bill that improves the environment with market mechanisms that balance cost and benefits and provide incentives for industry to meet pollution standards at lower cost in terms of jobs, efficiency, and production.

Kent Jeffreys
Policy Analyst