Rebuttal: Under Bush, air quality actually has improved

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Air quality has improved dramatically over the last several decades. Since 1970, aggregate emissions of the six principal air pollutants have been cut in half. Contrary to claims that the environment is under siege, these trends have continued under President Bush. Emissions of carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds, nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, and particulate matter were all lower in 2003 than in 2000, and there is every reason to expect this trend to continue regardless of who sits in the White House for the next four years.

Despite hysterical claims by environmental activists and Democratic partisans, the Bush administration has not "gutted" the Clean Air Act or otherwise endangered the environmental progress of the last 40 years. The primary regulatory standards governing air quality - National Ambient Air Quality Standards and the caps on emissions linked to acid rain place, as do regulations that require further emission reductions from vehicles and fuel.

Additional pollution controls are also in the works. The Bush administration adopted new rules to reduce emissions from off-road vehicles and diesel fuel, and is moving forward with stricter limits on power plant mercury emissions. Another rule will impose tighter limits on coal so they do not prevent downwind communities from meeting federal air quality standards. While it is fair to say that President Bush has been less aggressive on this front than Gore might have been, charges of a massive environmental "rollback" are simply unfounded.

Most critiques of the Bush environmental record have focused on the administration's failure to reform New Source Review (NSR) - a program under the Clean Air Act that requires modified power plants and industrial facilities to adopt state-of-the-art pollution controls. Plants built before the adoption of NSR in 1977 were grandfathered by Congress and such controls only when they are expanded or substantially modified. While well-inte...
NSR may do as much to retard environmental progress as it does to ensure cleaner air. Complying with NSR is costly and time-consuming, so companies seek to avoid facilities that can trigger its requirements. In this fashion, NSR discourages companies from using existing facilities to make them more reliable, efficient and environmentally sound. Under current rules, it is more cost-effective to keep older, dirtier plants in operation as they are then able to improve their environmental performance or replace them altogether.

"Not only does the New Source Review deter investment in newer, cleaner technology, it discourages companies from keeping power plants maintained," according to Robert K. Reischl of Harvard University and Howard Gruenspecht of Resources for the Future. This is bad for both the environment, not to mention worker safety and plant reliability - and the reason that the Bush administration has sought to make NSR more flexible.

While some environmental activists now claim NSR is an integral part of the Clean Air Act, independent environmental analysts have long called for NSR reform. The National Association of Electric Power Service Cooperatives, Public Administration and analysts from the Progressive Policy Institute, American Enterprise Institute, and Environmental Law Institute, among others, have all called for replacing the New Source Review with a cap-and-trade program for utility emissions. President Bush's proposed "Clear Skies" adopts just this sort of approach.

If adopted by Congress, "Clear Skies" would reduce utility emissions of sulfur dioxide, and mercury by 70 percent, and at a substantially lower cost than existing control regulations. Some claim "Clear Skies" would produce slower reductions than the current approach, but this assumes new rounds of administrative controls are rolled out on time and not held up by litigation - a questionable assumption given the history of air pollution controls. The experience of experience in the debate over air pollution policy - and environmental protection more broadly - is that if "Clear Skies" is adopted, the nation's air will be cleaner, not more polluted, than it otherwise might be.

In the debate over air pollution policy - and environmental protection more broadly - there are real differences between the candidates on how to address environmental concerns, neither candidate for president is "anti-environmentalist," both emphasize the protection of the environment, and both have called for new regulations to protect the air and water. Whether the administration has undermined the foundations of environmental laws is not a question of whether the law is better or worse, but how it is implemented. At this point in time, it is not clear that the administration has undermined the foundations of environmental law, but it has certainly made it more difficult to enforce them.

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