

Four More Years for the Earth

During the second debate, President Bush tried to defend his environmental record. He said, "I guess you'd say I'm a good steward of the land. The quality of the air is cleaner since I've been the president." Nothing could be further from the truth.

By every measure the Bush record on the environment is atrocious and terrifying. The Natural Resources Defense Council has compiled a list of more than 300 rollbacks, rule changes and policy initiatives that Bush has used to hand out precious natural resources and subsidies to his corporate cronies at great cost to the rest of us.

As bad as it has been, we now have to think seriously about what Bush could accomplish with another four years and what it would cost the Earth.

When making predictions, it is always helpful to have a sense of the past so that trends can be discerned. The first thing to note is that the environment is still a relatively new concern in society and the relationship of environmental protection to the economy is not clear in most people's minds.

There is also confusion over whether concern for the environment is a truly bipartisan issue or not. At the beginning of the modern environmental movement at the turn of the last century, Republican Teddy Roosevelt was one of the environment's first champions. Much of the landmark environmental legislation we rely on today was passed under the Nixon and Ford administrations the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the National Forest Protection Act and the National Environmental Policy Act. Nixon created EPA and OSHA.

Even under Reagan there was some environmental progress: 10.6 million acres of new Wilderness were designated and the important "viability" rule was promulgated. The viability rule requires the Forest Service to "maintain viable populations" of wildlife species on National Forest lands. The Bush administration has just repealed it.

But Reagan also appointed James Watt as Secretary of the Interior. A Christian fundamentalist, Watt believed that we did not need to take care of the environment or worry about oil and gas depletion because Jesus was returning soon.

Watt was just the tip of an iceberg of reaction to the environmental movement that had arisen so enthusiastically in the 1960's and 70's. Driven by resource extraction industries, the so-called Sagebrush Rebellion began organizing ranchers, loggers, miners and other workers to manufacture its own grassroots. By the 1990's it was calling itself the "Wise Use" movement and it had solidified its grip on Western politics.

The political structure of the Union has lent itself to an undue influence by resource extraction industries through the unrepresentative body of the U.S. Senate. The extreme example is Alaska, which due to its small population has only one seat in the House but possesses two whole Senators. The Western Senators, along with conservative Republicans in the House, have been able to block most new restrictions on mining, drilling, logging and pollution as well as most new designations of Wilderness and National Parks.

When Clinton took office in 1992, progress in environmental legislation had already come to a halt. Clinton's priorities were health care and economics and so he did not immediately pursue

a legislative agenda on the environment that might have yielded results while he still had a Democratic Congress to work with.

Instead, Clinton decided to wade into the most turbulent environmental waters in the country by convening his Timber Summit to resolve the ancient forest logging debate. This produced the Northwest Forest Plan, which increased the role of science in forest management.

Yet, the Northwest Forest Plan, like nearly all of Clinton's environmental accomplishments, came in the form of an administrative rule, not as authorizing legislation passed by Congress. This strategy comes back to haunt us now as nearly all of the Bush environmental rollbacks take the form of administrative rule changes.

Why is it that landmark environmental legislation could be passed during the conservative Nixon administration but the green-leaning Clinton administration could only protect the environment through the back door?

It has to do with the environmental end game that the world is now engaged in.

The environmental movement grew in the 1960's and 70's in reaction to the post war economy and its accelerated blighting of the air and water. People demanded cleaner air and water. The cost to industry was not so great and progress was made.

Now, at the beginning of a new century, resource depletion is the greater issue. Crunch time is coming, and how many people will oppose a nuclear power plant or a dirty coal plant if they feel their only alternative is to "freeze in the dark?"

As human population expands and the globe shrinks, control of resources is more and more the easy route to political power.

So here is what we can expect from another four years of Bush environmental policies:

Most important will be the ever increasing move of foxes into the henhouse. Former mining, timber and oil executives already occupy the top positions at the Forest Service, Department of Interior and EPA. Four more years will give them time to sweep out environmentally concerned professionals from thousands of positions. As a public lands advocate, one thing I noticed during the Clinton administration was the steady increase of the "-ologists" - the biologists, geologists, ecologists and other scientists who began to take charge at every level of the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. Many of these scientists will not last through another four years of Bush. They will be replaced by resource industry minions.

Next will be the resulting rule changes and policy rollbacks at the administrative level along with selective enforcement, no enforcement and defunding of programs. An agency like the Forest Service can be turned into a complete servant of the timber industry in this way. Al Gore recently called it "institutionalized corruption."

The role of science will continue to be diminished at every level. This administration has already stacked scientific advisory panels with industry hacks. It has buried the results of studies it did not like and it has made the EPA remove references to global warming in reports. In the future, if it bothers to convene scientific studies at all, they will be far from objective.

We can expect to see more sweetheart lawsuits from industry aimed at lifting environmental protections. The timber industry has sued the federal government on a variety of issues including roadless area protections, Endangered Species designations for salmon and wildlife survey requirements. The government has refused to defend itself. Only timely interventions by environmental law groups like Earthjustice have been able to stave off some of the damage.

As the rule changes and policy rollbacks continue, won't environmentalists be able to bring their own lawsuits? Yes, in some cases, as time and resources allow, environmentalists will be

able to challenge Bush rule changes as going against the intent of the environmental laws that the rules interpret. But as Bush continues to stack the judiciary with pro-corporate judges, environmental litigation will be less and less effective.

If the November elections also bring in a sweep of new Republican, anti-environmental legislators, the damage Bush can do in a second term will not be limited to rule changes and "institutionalized corruption." He will finally have a chance to destroy the bedrock environmental laws like the Endangered Species Act that have been untouchable until now.

And when all else fails, there is always delay. Delay is a tactic that is especially valuable at election time and Bush is using it today on some hot button environmental issues. Bush originally targeted the popular roadless rule for destruction by September, but after a huge outcry, delayed the final decision till November. Hunters and fishermen, the "hook and bullet crowd," (seen as a key Bush constituency) complained about the impact to wildlife of gas drilling along the Rocky Mountain Front. Bush responded by delaying the decision for several years, well into his possible second term.

The consequences of the total meltdown of environmental protections in this country will be devastating. Already, after only four years studies show that our air and water are dirtier. Childhood asthma is on the rise. Toxic waste sites are festering as the Superfund to clean them has been wiped out. Wild places are being drilled, cut and mined. Wildlife is disappearing every day. Every year we pump more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere as Bush hides his head in the sand on global warming.

Despite all the oil and gas development Bush has approved there is no way for America to drill itself to energy independence.

With no viable plan for developing renewable energy, America will soon find itself pulled into an economic black hole as China, Japan and Europe build new economies based more on wind and solar power.

Then people will finally understand the relationship between the environment and the economy.