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- Resources
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Sunday, September 28, 2003

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COLUMN: *Nancy Grape*

**Revolving door why Mainers suffer**

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For decades, Maine has been fighting pollution caused by aging out-of-state power plants that spew pollutants across the Northeast like fumes from an 18-wheeler's exhaust pipe.

Over those decades, Mainers have learned the difference between those who talk about cleaning up pollution and those who actually do something to limit the damage.

That's why the Bush administration's recent weakening of the Clean Air Act New Source Review permit and enforcement program has gained no applause in Maine and President Bush's talk of a "Clear Skies" initiative leaves Mainers shrugging their shoulders.

As people at the end of the tailpipe when airborne pollution travels from Midwest and Southern power plants across the Northeast, Mainers have lived for generations with the smokestack problem. And we've lived as well with people determined to do something about it - true champions of clean air and clear skies such as the late Ed Muskie and former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell.

That's why we recognize empty suits when we see them.

What we're less likely to see, however, are those who go from important government environmental posts to cushy private-sector jobs in areas they've been trusted to regulate, using Washington's Wheel of the Fortunate revolving door.

TWO RECENT examples reported by Seth Borenstein of the Philadelphia Inquirer are worth noticing.

"Two top Environmental Protection Agency officials who were deeply involved in easing an air-pollution rule for old power plants recently accepted private-sector jobs with companies that benefit from the changes," Borenstein reported earlier this month.

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Within days of the EPA's controversial New Source Review changes - which now mandate that advanced air pollution controls need be installed only on plants that spend more than 20 percent of their replacement cost on any upgrade - John Pemberton, the chief of staff in the EPA's air and radiation office, announced he would be joining Southern Co., an Atlanta-based utility that Berenstein called "the nation's No. 2 power-plant polluter."

Spinning through the revolving door, too, was Ed Krenik, the EPA's associate administrator for congressional affairs. Krenik, who played a key role in dealing with congressional critics when the power-plant rule was weakened, moved on to Bracewell & Patterson, a Houston-based law firm that, in Borenstein's words, "coordinated lobbying for several utilities on easing the power-plant pollution rule."

Macy's and Gimbel's never had it so smooth.

"The Washington revolving door between government and industry is not new," says Maine Democratic Rep. Tom Allen, "but the departure of these two EPA officials is further evidence that the polluters are in control of this administration. They left public service to serve the very industries and companies that benefit from the regulations they just helped to establish."

It's tough to argue with that. But EPA has been quick to splash on the whitewash.

"John and Ed know their ethical requirements, have been briefed by EPA's ethics office and will follow to the letter the ethical requirements of the federal government," said EPA spokesperson Lisa Harrison.

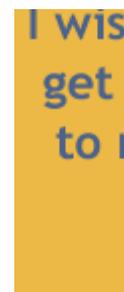
Such by-the-book assurances, however, don't carry much weight. They haven't stopped Allen from labeling the revision of the Clean Air Act's New Source Review standards "the most recent and obvious sign that the EPA has become captive to the industries it regulates."

Anyone with an eye on the revolving door can say "Amen" to that.

Observers of the long - and seemingly endless - journey toward clean air and water that started with Muskie are left to say "Amen," too, to Allen's assessment that Bush's Clear Skies initiative "is a triumph of marketing over substance." Why? "Because," in Allen's words, "it weakens the standards and extends the time for compliance for polluters as compared to strict enforcement of the Clean Air Act."

Earlier Allen had written to Bush with his concerns about undercutting pollution controls. It fell to Krenik of the EPA to respond. And Allen, who knows that when it comes to governing, the devil is in the details, found the devil in Krenik's punctuation.

"By the careful placing of a period, he was able to separate the



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two ideas that the president linked in his State of the Union address - namely, that Clear Skies 'mandates a 70 percent cut in air pollution from power plants over the next 15 years,' " Allen emphasizes. "Carefully read, Mr. Krenik's response indicates that there will be a mandatory cap in 15 years, but the 70 percent reduction in emissions will only come later."

WHATEVER THE public promises about Clear Skies, Allen calls Krenik's careful separation of reduced pollution levels from their timetable "one more example, if any are needed, of the pattern of deception that marks the administration's environmental policies." And Maine continues to live with the results.

No question, utilities with aging power plants face real problems. They are caught between a mandate to hold down energy costs to protect their state and regional economies and the desire to upgrade plants for greater productivity and efficiency. Those are the same problems they faced when Muskie first took on the task of cleaning up the nation's air and water nearly a half-century ago. They are the same problems Mitchell confronted when he first went after the plants themselves.

Yet, rather than upgrade to state-of-the-art pollution controls in tandem with upgrading their plants, powerful utilities have chosen to defer upgrades and wait for a friendly presidential administration. Now they have one, and the pollution continues.

Helping it affect Maine are empty words and an ever-spinning revolving door.

- Nancy Grape (e-mail: [spargrape@msn.com](mailto:spargrape@msn.com)) comments on state and national issues for the Maine Sunday Telegram.

[To top of page](#)

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