

President's plans for 'clean air'

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● On Earth Day, let's remind President Bush that Mainers like to breathe.

How appropriate that on Earth Day the president would choose to visit the state most assaulted by his environmental rollbacks.

Maine, after all, has the dubious distinction of being "America's tailpipe" since the air – and therefore the ickies in the air – from other states zips through here. So, when the administration decides that the current air pollution rules are too tough on industry, Maine pharmacies have to stock up on asthma inhalers.

When President Bush visits Wells tomorrow, no doubt there will be lots of happy talk about good greening (and there is that, too), but let's be sure not to gloss over the president's environmental record to date.

Let's peek at just a few highlights



related to air pollution: mercury, for instance. This one's really a doozy.

President Bush has wanted to change Clean Air Act requirements for mercury under his Clear Skies Initiative, which purports to reduce air pollution. It *sounds* really good when the president says it, sort of in the same way that "effluent" sounds better than "raw sewage."

The president likes to explain that his initiative will dramatically cut dangerous emissions – including mercury – from power plants. Well, sort of.

What it does actually is undermine the Clean Air Act and buy the energy industry a lot more time to pollute. It delays implementation of Clean Air

Act regulations and makes them weaker.

So when the president says his initiative will cut emissions, it's sort of like if a person gained 100 pounds and then lost 50.

Already, we know that eating fish contaminated with mercury is bad – so much so that Maine already warns its residents not to eat too many fish from the state's rivers and lakes. This is nasty stuff. Pregnant women who eat contaminated fish risk developmental disabilities and neurological defects in their babies. Already, one in six women have enough mercury in their blood to pose a danger. Even adults can experience neurological problems from mercury contamination.

We know these things, yet the Bush administration wants to make it easier for the coal industry to keep spewing this stuff into the air. The New York Times reported that the White House was scratching out or changing information on the toxic effects of mercury to downplay the danger. The EPA also

are just a good fish story

wants to reclassify mercury so that it isn't subject to the tough rules it's subject to now.

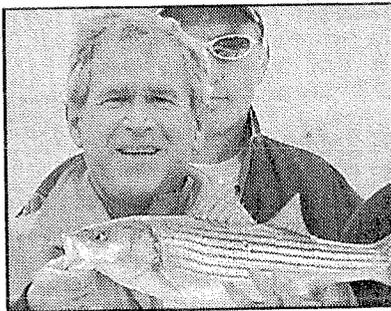
This is pre-school logic: If we close our eyes, then it doesn't exist. Works for monsters in the closet – but not for metal in fish.

The whole process by which new mercury rules were created appears to be corrupted. The Los Angeles Times said that EPA staffers were told not to conduct the usual studies in the rule-making process, and language in the proposed mercury regulations was, in some places, supplied word-for-word by industry advocates.

This should offend anyone with lungs.

Another puzzler is the changes to the new source review provision of the Clean Air Act. Last fall, the General Accounting Office reported that the EPA's revisions to this part of the act were based largely on anecdotal data from the industry.

Oh, So, science is obsolete then? I wish somebody had told me. That would have made an interesting col-



File photo

Clean air shouldn't be the one that got away.

umn topic.

The New York Times Magazine published a disturbing article earlier this month by Bruce Barcott, contributing editor at Outside magazine, all about these new source review rules. In a nutshell, the rules were changed simply because the industry didn't like them.

This has been an issue evolving over a long period of time. The rules were added to the Clean Air Act in 1977 to require power companies to

install new pollution control technology when they upgraded their equipment. Long disputes followed about the difference between "upgrading" and "routine maintenance" and the law was largely ignored. So, the EPA got crabby about it and took the industry to court.

Just when it appeared that the EPA was about to make headway, oops! There was an election and Bush took office. How did he get there? (Something I ask myself every day.) Well, it couldn't have hurt that there were lots of big campaign contributions from – brace yourself – the energy industry.

Tomorrow, somebody needs to remind President Bush that Maine is one of the 18 battleground states in the upcoming presidential election, and that asthmatics vote, too.

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