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T.M. Power

### **The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as Whipping Boy**

The United States Environmental Protection Agency has been under attack by conservatives and corporate interests for some time now for its supposed “job killing” regulatory proposals. The “over reach” of which EPA is accused has been largely tied to its proposed stricter air quality regulations.

Some of this new regulation is aimed at older electric generators that were grand-fathered in when the Clean Air Act and its various amendments were passed over the last four decades. It was assumed that many of these old plants would be quickly abandoned and replaced with plants to which more strict pollution standards would apply. Instead these old electric generators discovered a “fountain of youth” that has allowed them to survive and remain in service indefinitely, belching out pollution just like in the good old days. Those stricter standards applied to new facilities created an incentive to constantly rebuild the older plants from the inside out in a way that was not considered a replacement of the plant even though that was what was going on in small increments. As a result, we still have lots of old coal fired electric generators spewing out dangerous amounts of various air pollutants. EPA has proposed to do something about that.

Some of the new air quality regulations aim at bringing pollutants that were not previously regulated under control because of the mounting evidence that they are more dangerous than previously known. This includes mercury and very fine particulates that lodge themselves deep in our lungs. The slurries of coal ash and all of the toxic

chemicals in the large ponds of waste sludge from electric generators have also caused concern.

Finally, of course, there is the potential regulation of greenhouse gas emissions by EPA. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that EPA has the authority to regulate greenhouse gases as pollutants under the Clean Air Act as long as it makes a finding that those emissions threaten the public health and the welfare of current and future generations. EPA has made that “endangerment finding” and is proceeding to develop regulations covering the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions.

All of this EPA regulatory activity has been vociferously attacked by corporate America and their supporting politicians as “job killing madness” that the nation cannot afford.

This, of course, is what has been said by corporate leaders every time pollution control regulations have been proposed. If we had followed their advice over the last half-century, our children would still be breathing the lead spewed out by our cars or from the dust and paint chips in lead-based interior paints in our homes. The mercury our kids are being forced to consume now has similar impacts on their development.

Or consider asbestos. Some of the nation’s largest corporations argued for decades and decades that asbestos was not a health risk and its prevalence in our businesses, homes, and schools should not be regulated. If they had had their way, we would still be poisoning small towns like Libby, Montana, as well as millions of homes and thousands of schools with that asbestos.

The sulfur emissions from coal-fired electric plants allowed the equivalent of sulfuric acid to rain down on our lakes, streams, forests, and croplands, reducing their biological productivity and undermining natural systems.

Chemicals and tiny particulate released into the air attacked our lungs and bronchia, causing irritation, the broad spread of asthma among our kids, and later lung and heart disease that caused extended illness and premature death.

Although it may be hard to trace each case of damaged childhood development, asthma, lung disease, and premature death to particular pollutants, public health scientists *can* statistically estimate the number of children who are being disabled, the number people whose health is being damaged, and the number of people whose lives are being cut short.

The attack dogs who have targeted on the Environmental Protection Agency like to suggest that air and water pollution is just an aesthetic concern that we cannot afford. It would nice if the air and water were cleaner, they tell us, just as a well-tended lawn or park would be nice or flowers growing in a highway median would be pretty. But given the state of the economy, they tell us, we just cannot afford the damage additional environmental regulation would do to the economy.

But this is simply the cynical abuse of hard times to pursue an agenda that corporate America has pushed in both good times and bad. EPA's proposed air quality regulations are not about aesthetics, they are about public health and safety. They seek to protect the health and lives of our kids as well as those of our working-age adults and seniors.

The corporate community always seeks to hold our health and longevity hostage to what they say is our own economic interests. Protecting our health, they say, will permanently damage the economy on which we depend. But as we have effectively gone about significantly cleaning up our air and water for a half-century or more now that is **not** what has happened. Our business firms have found ways to adapt and clean up their production processes so that we could have both prosperity and a healthful environment. That is also what will happen following EPA's next steps at fine tuning our air quality regulations.