

Editorials

Protecting air, land and water

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Distracted by war and economic losses, Americans have barely blinked at the unprecedented assault on environmental protections at every level of government in recent years, nowhere more evident than in Florida.

Disguising the assaults with promising policy titles like "Clear Skies," "Healthy Forests" and, closer to home, "Everglades Restoration," the Bush brothers, supported by anti-regulatory legislators in the Legislature and Congress, have made it easier for businesses to profit by polluting the air and water, easier for oil, mining and timber companies to plunder public lands, easier to shift water from Everglades restoration to supply South Florida farmers and developers -- but harder for the public to sue for environmental destruction. Their administrations have reduced enforcement and oversight of remaining environmental protections even as they tout feel-good slogans like "no net loss" of wetlands.

In fact, the nation continues to lose wetlands at an alarming rate. An analysis by the St. Petersburg Times last year determined Florida had lost 84,000 acres of wetlands since 1990. Developers are mounting a new press for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to turn

over its permitting authority on wetlands of 10 acres or less to the state. The idea is that the state would approve permits faster than the Corps, although the Corps seldom rejects a permit request. As the Times pointed out, Florida's own permitting rules fail to protect against water pollution, and the areas suffering from pollution have lost the most wetlands to urban development.

Additionally, efforts continue at the state and national levels to delist endangered species, and worse, to gut the federal Endangered Species Act. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, has already reintroduced the provisions of the hateful Pombo bill, defeated in Congress last month. In the win column, Volusia County's attempt to pass off a manatee protection scheme that would have sacrificed endangered sea cows for boat slips didn't pass muster with the state last year.

The coming year also brings additional environmental concerns. For instance:

- A French energy company is proposing to build a natural-gas terminal 10 miles off the Florida coast at Fort Lauderdale. Tankers would deliver fuel to power plants in South Florida, but at what potential expense to already endangered coral reefs?

- As development and population growth continue apace in Volusia and Flagler counties, the public debate has focused on condo redevelopment, suburban sprawl and traffic congestion, as if environmental loss is a foregone conclusion. We've bought into the developers' game of simply arguing over how much "green" we lose.

As the Legislature shifts more comprehensive land-use planning oversight to local governments, the pressure increases to build on watershed headwaters, to allow urban sprawl in conservation corridors, to approve rural development through so-called "clustering" and "development rights" compromises that save some open land but assure the continued loss of wetlands and wildlife habitat.

The current ideological push for less government and more private property rights threatens to erode even more of the hard-fought gains in environmental protections of the past 35 years. It will take a determined and vocal public to prevent that in 2006, a public who will once again consider the legacy of America's open spaces, wild creatures, clean air and water a priority.