

The Clean Air Act: Myth Versus Reality

February 2011

Myth

Myth #1 — Economics:

- Pollution reduction under the Clean Air Act will cost too much and hinder economic recovery.
- The Clean Air Act will ship jobs overseas, harm our trade balance or put us behind China and other developing countries who aren't limiting their greenhouse gas pollution.
- The Clean Air Act will shut down “mom and pop” operations such as dry cleaners and hot dog stands.

Reality

There is no credible evidence that the Clean Air Act will hinder economic growth.

In fact, the Clean Air Act saves us money and benefits the economy. In its first two decades alone, it created benefits valued at \$22.2 trillion — 42 times greater than the estimated costs of its regulations. [1]

Polluters often oppose new environmental and health protections with exaggerated estimates of the costs to polluters themselves. While the regulated industries have a clear incentive to overstate compliance costs, even estimates produced by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other agencies almost always greatly overstate the costs. One of the main reasons for this is that regulation spurs innovation and technological advancement, reducing the cost of pollution controls in ways impossible to fully anticipate in advance. Thus, the economic doomsday scenarios promoted time and again by polluters fail to materialize. [2], [3], [4]

Study after study has found that a shift to a clean energy economy will create many good new jobs. [5] Environmental costs in the United States are generally less than 2 percent of business costs and are not the reason for firms' decisions to relocate outside the country, decisions which are typically driven by other factors. [5] In fact, ambitious health and safety regulations can actually create a competitive advantage for U.S. industry by continually spurring the innovation that is so critical to success in today's global economy. [4]

In short, the economic “arguments” against the Clean Air Act made by the nation's largest polluters are self-serving myths. That's why trade associations representing 60,000 businesses recently wrote to Congress [6] to oppose any effort to stop the EPA's greenhouse gas regulations. They cited a recent survey

finding that 61 percent of small business owners think moving the country to clean energy is a way to restart the economy and make their businesses more competitive in the global economy.

There is no credible evidence that small, “mom and pop” businesses will be harmed by the Clean Air Act, and in fact the EPA is starting with only the very biggest sources of carbon pollution first, like power plants and refineries. So-called “mom and pop” operations won’t be affected.

It’s true that dramatically reducing carbon in the United States will require big changes. For example, we must stop burning coal for energy. While a transition to a clean energy future will, overall, create far more jobs than are lost, there is no denying that jobs will be lost in the coal sector (though the coal industry has been steadily downsizing its workforce for decades due to mechanization and other changes to increase corporate profits.) This should be addressed through job retraining and other forms of assistance, but it makes no sense to argue that we should continue to burn coal — with disastrous consequences for the entire world — because we cannot adjust to changing employment patterns.

The Clean Air Act has saved many thousands of lives and improved health, and it has decreased hospitalizations, illnesses such as cancer and asthma, and lost school and work days. The EPA projected that in 2010 alone, the Clean Air Act would save 23,000 lives and prevent 1.7 million asthma attacks, 4.1 million lost work days, and more than 68,000 hospitalizations and emergency room visits. Even greater benefits can be expected from new rules to limit greenhouse pollution. There is no evidence that these gains came at the price of economic growth.

Myth

Myth #2 — Bureaucratic Overreach:

• Clean Air Act regulation for greenhouse gases represents overreach by the EPA, or will impinge on states’ rights or individual liberty.

Reality

The Texas Attorney General and other allies of big polluters claim that the EPA is overstepping its bounds and trampling on states’ rights or individual liberties. The truth is that the U.S. Supreme Court, in the seminal 2007 case *Massachusetts vs. EPA*, found that greenhouse gases are “pollutants” as defined by the Clean Air Act and that the EPA was therefore required to take action. The EPA is not acting arbitrarily. It’s acting by order of the U.S. Supreme Court.

The modern Clean Air Act in fact contains a careful balancing of authority and responsibilities between the federal and state governments. The states who complain about air pollution regulations are the ones who befoul not only their own air, but the air of all other states as well, without paying the price. The real states’ rights concern is for those states whose air is being polluted without their permission and without compensation.

The nation’s biggest polluters typically resist regulation so they can pass off the tremendous costs of environmental damage to all of us. Requiring polluters to comply with health and safety protections enhances, and does not diminish, our individual liberties.

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Reality

Myth #3 — Not the Right Tool:

- The Clean Air Act is not the right tool to curb carbon pollution.
- Congress didn't intend for the Clean Air Act to deal with a problem like greenhouse gas pollution.

The Clean Air Act is the world's most successful environmental and health protection law. The tools that have so effectively reduced emission of pollutants such as lead, ozone, particle pollution, and sulfur dioxide, which causes acid rain, will work just as well to reduce greenhouse gases.

When Congress passed the Clean Air Act, it understood that problems from new pollutants would become clear over time, and intentionally wrote the law to be broad and flexible so it could be used to address emerging problems like the climate crisis.

Myth #4 — Speculative Science:

- The science of climate change is unclear.

As one leading scientist put it, "There's a better scientific consensus on this than on any issue I know — except maybe Newton's second law of dynamics." [7] The science underlying global warming's causes and predicted effects has been validated by thousands of scientists in every country of the world, operating independently, by our finest scientific institutions and by painstaking review.

The United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has released a series of landmark reports about the global climate crisis, including the latest in 2007. [8] Although there is still legitimate debate on specific details about how the effects of this global crisis will play out, climate scientists around the world agree that man-made pollution is driving up the world's temperature and, left unchecked, will create widespread, long-term economic and ecological damage.

Myth #5 — Americans Don't Care About Climate Change or the Clean Air Act

Opinion polls consistently show that Americans overwhelmingly favor protecting the environment and the Clean Air Act.

92 percent of respondents to a survey by the Yale Project on Climate Change said the nation needs to act to reduce global warming. The same survey found that 80 percent of respondents thought government should regulate carbon dioxide as a pollutant. The top two reasons cited for the need for government action were to provide a better life for our children and grandchildren (66 percent) and to save many plant and animal species from extinction (65 percent). [9]

References

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Rose Braz, climate campaign coordinator, rbraz@biologicaldiversity.org or (415) 436-9682 ext. 319
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