

Every Breath You Take

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, January 7, 2004

"From the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans white with foam..."

As we launch and lurch into a new election year, we'll be hearing a lot of lofty patriotic anthems and stump speeches. But do our political leaders' actions live up to their words? While we're quaking in our boots over mysteriously cancelled air flights and newly released rantings of Osama Bin Laden, our government is ignoring the fact that we're living with a gang of killers-like carbon monoxide, mercury, and acid rain.

Talk about dangerous. These pollutants are poisoning our natural resources and wildlife at increasing speed. Repeated warnings about contaminated water and hazardous ozone levels frighten a wary public but fall on deaf ears in Washington. Political leaders sworn to protect the public have betrayed our trust. They oughta go take a hike.

We have a right to breathe without choking. We have a right to drink clean water. A right to eat food from our lakes and rivers without noxious chemicals. But those fundamental rights are being threatened by an administration that's gutted or reversed decades of environmental progress.

To keep it simple, let's focus on the air. In the 70s, the Clean Air Act held polluters accountable for emitting deleterious gases by targeting dirty power plants and antiquated factories. And for good reason. Vaporized chemicals spewed into the air are linked to increased environmental cancer, birth defects, and asthma. But the Environmental Protection Agency has relaxed provisions of the act, allowing industry to actually increase pollution. EPA investigations into violations of the Clean Air Act have been abandoned-although not without protest. Several state attorneys general are acting independently and filing lawsuits to improve pollution controls.

One of the more dangerous pollutants is mercury, a potent neurotoxin. Coal-burning power plants release about 40 percent of all U.S. mercury emissions; the contaminant drifts down into our waters and poisons the fish we eat. The EPA recently announced a proposal to control mercury pollution from

power plants; in fact, the rules would actually allow many times more mercury to be released than the current laws.

That back-pedaling on mercury restrictions hurts us all, but babies and pregnant mothers most of all. Mercury causes brain, lung, and kidney damage; it can deform or retard a developing fetus. Millions of vulnerable pregnant women have dangerous levels of mercury in their bloodstream, according to the Centers for Disease Control. The result: hundreds of thousands of newborns and children at risk of disability and mental illness. So tell me again, who's so concerned about the rights of the unborn?

The utility industry says mercury is a global, not local, problem; that the pollutant travels to U.S. shores from worldwide emissions and is therefore impossible to regulate. But a recent study by Environmental Defense, an advocacy group, shows that's flat-out wrong. Ten states, including Maryland, Michigan, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Florida, have high pockets of airborne mercury pollution, or "hot spots," the bulk of which comes directly from nearby coal-fired power plants and other industrial polluters. The authors say utilities are misleading the public, and mercury pollution can, in fact, be regulated.

One of the states with the highest levels of mercury is Texas, particularly in Port Arthur, where refineries and petrochemical plants crowd the horizon. According to the Community In-Power Association, residents there have the highest rates of respiratory illnesses in the state. And they're not the only ones getting sick. Asthma-exacerbated by air particulates and ozone discharge-has increased nationally to near epidemic proportions; in New York, one out of every four African American children is afflicted.

Just last month, 180 countries gathered in Milan, Italy, to discuss an environmental danger that dominates all others: global warming. Rising temperatures are caused by gas emissions, especially carbon dioxide, from factories and cars. Global warming killed 150,000 people in 2000 and the death toll could double over the next 30 years, according to the World Health Organization. The U.S. is a leading producer of carbon dioxide, but we are refusing to join the world community's efforts to reduce emissions.

In a ruling weeks ago, a federal appeals court temporarily blocked a new EPA rule that would further weaken the Clean Air Act. A legal battle looms between the administration and states and environmental groups.

Our government is caving in to narrow special interest at the expense of environmental common sense.
That's what I call Orange Code homeland insecurity.