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Every day is Earth Day

By H. Sterling Burnett

Environmentalists are quick to admonish, "Every Day is Earth Day" -- a mild reproach that everyone should daily consider how their actions affect the planet. In fairness, in the United States at least, the evidence suggests that every day is earth day, so environmentalists' sniping is unwarranted.

While there are various environmental problems, the environment has improved markedly since the first Earth Day in 1970. The Pacific Research Institute, now in conjunction with the American Enterprise Institute, has published an annual "Index of Leading Environmental Indicators" for 10 years.

Among good news this year: Air pollution is at an all-time low. The 2005 Index shows that since 1976, aggregate emission of air pollutants measured by the Environmental Protection Agency all substantially declined. Indeed, pick a pollutant, its levels have declined: Ozone is down 31 percent, sulfur dioxide is

down 72 percent, nitrogen dioxide is down 42 percent, carbon monoxide is down 76 percent, particulates are down 31 percent and lead has declined 98 percent.

So, for the first time since air pollution has been monitored, virtually the entire nation has achieved clean air standards for four of the six pollutants regulated under the Clean Air Act. As for ozone and particulates, the only pollutants that still widely exceed clean air standards, areas with the highest pollution have shown the greatest improvement. This means the reported average national decline understates the improvement in the worst areas. While the nation still has a way to go, this year's ozone levels were a record low.

Much decline is due to cars getting cleaner every year. Indeed, the Environmental Protection Agency estimates auto-fleet emissions will decline more than 80 percent over the next 25 years. Ain't technological innovation grand.

On the waterfront, pun intended, things are getting better as well. While even the EPA argues the current levels of mercury in fish are unlikely to pose a significant health risk, it is certainly a public concern. Thus, the public should be happy to learn mercury emissions have declined by 45 percent since 1990.

And, for good or for bad, swamps are making a comeback as well. The loss of wetlands to development and agriculture has steadily declined from 400,000 acres on average annually in the mid-1950s to less than 50,000 acres each year by the mid-1990s. However, due to a combination of public and private wetland restoration, the U.S. is seeing a net gain in wetlands. From 1997 to 2002, on private lands alone, wetlands expanded about 26,000 acres per year. And the federal Wetlands Reserve Program has restored as much as 210,000 acres of wetlands in some years.

The U.S. is arguably leading the world in forest

expansion and protection. According to the United Nations, U.S. forestlands expanded more than 9.5 million acres since 1990. By comparison, over the same period European forests expanded by only 1.1 million acres. Taking account of the difference in total land area between the U.S. and the European Union, forestland here. expanded 4 times faster than in Europe.

Contrary to popular belief, the U.S. has not ignored global warming. The U.S. has spent more money -- more than \$6 billion -- than any other government on creating and promoting technologies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while continuing economic growth. These efforts include \$700 million in tax credits to promote clean technologies, \$3 billion in research on new clean technologies and \$200 million to transfer of clean technology to developing countries.

In addition, the United States crafted an international treaty turning the powerful greenhouse gas, methane, into a marketable product. According to the Energy Department, by 2015 the Methane to Markets program will remove about 1 percent of all greenhouse gases humans emit into the atmosphere. This is the equivalent of taking 33

million cars off the road, or shutting down 50 coal-fired power plants or heating 7.2 million homes. And, M2M might produce net economic benefits, since plugging natural gas pipeline leaks saves product. And methane captured at farms and landfills can fuel local power plants.

Undoubtedly, we should not rest on our laurels. Environmental improvement is a worthwhile goal and more should and will be done. However, the public should celebrate how much the environment has improved. And if any day is a good day to do so, Earth Day certainly is.

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