

The Examiner

Don't tell anybody but we can all breathe easier now

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Max Borders, The Examiner

WASHINGTON - A lot of people have a vested interest in making you think air pollution is getting worse. Rather than put themselves out of jobs, air quality regulators make standards for safe levels of pollution stricter — continuously.

In response, environmental reporters ladle out bad news about what SUVs are doing to the lungs of our children, hyperbolize about the occasional mid-summer ozone violation by this city or that, or distill reports by groups like the American Lung Association that get funds through fear-mongering.

But please, gentle reader, know this: Air pollution is at an all-time low. And this fact is made all the more incredible by another fact: There are more vehicles on the road than ever.

According to a new **National Center for Policy Analysis** report by environmental scientist Joel Schwartz, we can all breathe a little easier now. Consider some of these stunning highlights. Between 1980 and 2005:

» Fine particulate matter dropped 40 percent.

» Nitrogen dioxide levels decreased by 37 percent, sulfur dioxide decreased by 63 percent, and CO concentrations by 74 percent.

» Lead levels dropped 96 percent.

» Peak eight-hour ozone levels declined 20 percent, and days-per-year exceeding the eight-hour ozone standard fell 79 percent.

When you stack these improvements against the data on major emitters, the air quality improvements made over the last 25 years are nothing short of extraordinary:

» Automobile miles driven nearly doubled, increasing by 96 percent.

» Diesel truck miles driven more than doubled, increasing by 112 percent.

» Coal burning for electricity production increased by about 61 percent.

» U.S. GDP more than doubled, growing by 114 percent.

So if the news about air pollution is so good, why aren't we hearing about it? And at what point will air quality be such that

regulators simply call it a day? After all, the risks of pollution-related illnesses are shrinking so much that they may have already sunk below the point of reasonably justifying bureaucratic and regulatory costs imposed on us by both the EPA and the states.

The answers to such questions are complex and interconnected. Suffice it to say that there is a (perhaps unconscious) collusion among researchers, media types, environmental alarmists and bureaucrats. Alarmism is big business, after all.

Studies that report harmful effects of air pollution are more likely to get press. Government officials fund most research, but funding flows from the need to prove that harm exists and rarely follows on from instances where no harm is found.

Plus, according to Schwarz, "Regulators create fear through regional air pollution alert systems, such as 'code red' days; even though pollution levels are dropping, the number of warnings increases because of increasingly tighter standards." This "axis of alarmism" keeps a

lot of people in the scaring business.

One problem with this axis is that — while providing cushy jobs for bureaucrats, researchers and reporters — it generates tremendous waste. Money spent on this scare study or that EPA position could go to other causes, including environmental ones. And onerous regulation that no longer does any good both takes money out of the economy and limits innovation.

Indeed, some regulations, like the New Source Review (part of the Clean Air Act), can result in pollution worse than might otherwise have been, or wasted resources. That's because businesses must equip smokestacks with "state of the art" pollution controls when they build a new plant or modify an existing one.

So one of two possible perverse effects can occur. Either the business puts R&D funds into keeping older, more polluting plants in service (to avoid the high regulatory costs of building a new one), or the business must funnel significant resources into outfitting a new plant with technology that offers only marginal pollution control benefits when compared with a new unregulated plant.

Ultimately, old, dirty plants stay around a lot longer than they should. So despite all the improvements brought by more efficient cars, trucks

and plants that are far less polluting, it appears laws designed to protect us may have actually made the air dirtier than it could have been.

So what should we make of all this? If the public knew the truth about improved air quality — not to mention how many resources are being diverted to unproductive regulations and alarmism — we might be able to see through the smokescreen and bankrupt this business keeping us all afraid.

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