

# The George W. Bush Administration at Mid-term: A Cloud over America's Natural Heritage

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In the Fall 2000 issue of *The Green Elephant*, Republicans for Environmental Protection published an in-depth report of George W. Bush's environmental track record as governor of Texas.

While we considered his previous actions to be strong predictors of the actions he would take as president, we expressed our hope that he would rise to the occasion as president of the entire United States of America and chart a better environmental course for the country than he had for his state. Unfortunately, that has not proved to be the case so far.

Now, as President Bush completes his second year in office, we are taking a similar look at his administration's environmental track record.

## **Some Positive Achievements**

In fairness, the President's record includes a number of positive actions. President Bush signed the reauthorization of the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and legislation adding more than half a million acres to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Under his watch, farm conservation programs have been expanded significantly. The EPA retained fuel and engine standards to clean up unhealthy diesel emissions from trucks and buses. The administration is now drafting a rule to substantially reduce diesel emissions from "off-road" heavy equipment, such as tractors and bulldozers.

The Bush administration has backed restoration of the Everglades and made special efforts to protect Big Cypress National Preserve and the Florida coast from oil and gas exploration.

There have been a few other positive initiatives as well—identified as "**Silver Linings**" in the Report Card that follows.

## **A Litany of Bad Policies**

Overall, however, the Bush administration has promoted a litany of policies that will perpetuate America's risky dependence on fossil fuels, weaken air and water quality protection, and degrade America's public lands heritage—resulting in lasting harm to the nation. Sadly, these are not actions consistent with the tradition of patriotic stewardship best exemplified by Theodore Roosevelt.

Some of the changes that the Bush administration imposed have been incremental, although apparently not out of a sense of caution—the truly conservative approach to momentous policy changes— but out of a desire to slip such changes through without public outcry.

### **Administrative Stealth**

The Bush administration appears to have learned from the clumsiness of Newt Gingrich's 104th Congress, whose head-on assaults on popular environmental policies resulted in a sharp public backlash. When undermining popular policies, the administration has perfected the technique of using administrative changes that the public—its attention focused on guns and butter—tends not to notice.

### **Crony Capitalism**

In other areas, the administration's actions have been broad and deep, fulfilling the agenda of crony capitalists demanding dining privileges at the government trough and hard-edged ideologues who seem to believe that protecting America's public health and natural heritage and our global life-support system is a left-wing plot.

## **George W. Bush's Mid-term Environmental Report Card**

The actions and policies described in our analysis below are rated as follows:

- A excellent**
- B satisfactory**
- C mixed results**
- D poor**
- F disastrous**

Following each grade are Republicans for Environmental Protection's suggestions of ways that the administration can improve its grade in that particular category.

**PLEASE NOTE:** There is still time for President Bush to rethink his approach and return to traditional Republican conservation values. We and millions of other Americans would be thrilled to see our president attempt to match the environmental records of Theodore Roosevelt, Richard Nixon and other great Republican conservationists, both past and present.

## 1. Energy Policy

The administration's National Energy Policy—developed in secret and under the disproportionate influence of energy industry lobbyists—would increase and prolong America's dependence on fossil fuels, especially coal and Middle Eastern oil.

If implemented fully, this policy would have profound consequences for the national and global environment, including increased greenhouse gas emissions; increased air and water pollution; and degradation of pristine areas such as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Rocky Mountain Front, and many coastal areas and wildlands where the administration seeks to explore for fossil fuels. Because energy is a highly capital-intensive business, the policy would lock in a fossil-dominated energy system for decades.

The president's policy would slow the transition to clean, secure energy technologies, which represent an enormous potential for investment and jobs growth. If we spurn this opportunity, our competitors in Europe and Japan will gladly take the business.

Complacently allowing greenhouse gas emissions to rise is a dangerous gamble. Carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere could push the global climate system past a tipping point, which scientists say could result in rapid, disastrous climate change lasting for centuries.

Increased dependence on oil means increased dependence on foreign oil, perpetuating U.S. entanglements in alliances with unstable, despotic regimes that support terrorists and with corrupt "kleptocrats"—crooked regimes whose leaders line their pockets with oil revenues while their countrymen are destitute.

**Silver Linings:** The Bush administration's policy endorses energy efficiency and renewable energy development. President Bush has directed Executive Branch departments to improve their energy efficiency in order to set a good example, and ordered a crackdown on "vampire" electronic devices that waste energy.

But much, much more could be done. The administration has resisted significant strengthening of motor vehicle fuel efficiency standards, the single most effective strategy for curbing our growing oil appetite. The administration also is cool about following the bold lead of Governor George Pataki (R, NY) in promoting "renewable portfolio standards," which increase markets for power plants running on renewable energy.

### Energy Policy Grade: F

**Ways to Improve:** Our nation needs an energy strategy that will protect the environment, promote economic growth, and strengthen national security. Our nation needs a New Manhattan Project of the sort that Republicans for Environmental Protection proposed in the Fall 2001 issue of *The Green Elephant*.

Our New Manhattan Project would rely on a combination of federal research,

efficiency and portfolio standards, incentives, and procurement policies to improve energy conservation and aggressively speed the commercialization of clean, efficient, domestic energy sources, including fuel and electricity from hydrogen, wind, solar, the ocean, underground heat, and farm products.

More information is available in Republicans for Environmental Protection's [Energy position paper](#), our [New Manhattan Project article](#), a sign-on [letter to President Bush](#), and many published [op-eds](#) and [letters to the editor](#).

## 2. Climate Change

Early in his term, President Bush broke a campaign promise to seek caps on power plant emissions of carbon dioxide, which account for one-third of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. Also, he unilaterally pulled the U.S. out of the Kyoto Protocol—a useful first step toward cutting greenhouse gas emissions worldwide—while promising to offer a better substitute. To date, however, the administration has failed to produce a credible plan that would achieve real reductions in the greenhouse gases that are changing the global climate.

The administration's plan to seek voluntary reductions in greenhouse gas intensity is a timid idea that *The Economist* described as "all hat and no cattle." Reducing greenhouse gas intensity (emissions per dollar of GDP) 18% by 2012, as the administration proposed, would still mean an absolute increase of 14% in greenhouse gases. While voluntary measures are a valuable component of national climate policy, they are not adequate as a stand-alone policy for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

**Silver Linings:** Last year, EPA posted on its web site an acknowledgement that the science documenting global warming is clear and compelling, despite years of denial and deliberate confusion sown by naysayers in the fossil fuel industry and obtuse radio talk-show hosts. EPA accepted evidence that global temperatures are rising, that the changes are caused at least in part by human activities, and that very serious impacts are in store, including increased frequency of heat waves, spread of disease-carrying pests, loss of coastal wetlands, and reduction in mountain snowpack that furnishes water to many Western communities and farms.

Unfortunately, the president dismissed the credibility of the EPA report.

### Climate Change Grade: D-

**Ways to Improve:** Senator John McCain is co-sponsoring a sensible, thoughtful bill to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by the electricity-generation, petroleum-refining, commercial, and industrial sectors.<sup>3</sup> The bill would employ a market-based "cap-and-trade" system rewarding companies for emissions reduction projects that get the most bang for the buck. The administration should back the McCain bill, which will create opportunities for American companies to profit from investments in energy efficiency and new energy technologies.

The Kyoto Protocol is not perfect, especially since it requires only small steps toward the 70% reductions in carbon dioxide emissions that scientists estimate are needed to stop the buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Nevertheless, the protocol could serve as a useful forum for strong U.S. climate leadership that would have enormous environmental, economic and national security benefits. The president's withdrawal from the Protocol was perceived by other nations as proof that the U.S. has no intention of taking climate issues seriously. In the long run, this dismissive attitude will be inimical to U.S. political and economic interests.

A better approach would be to rejoin Kyoto, but press immediately for revisions to broaden its reach and set a long-term course for greenhouse gas reductions made possible with American clean energy technologies commercialized through the New Manhattan Project.

For more information, see our [Climate Change policy paper](#).

### 3. Air Quality

With the exception of strong programs to reduce harmful diesel emissions, the Bush administration has promoted policies that would needlessly delay pollution reductions necessary to protect public health, while resisting policies that would encourage comprehensive, cost-effective pollution reduction strategies.

The administration's "Clear Skies" proposal would employ a "cap-and-trade" system rewarding utilities for implementing cost-effective projects to cut power plant emissions of nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, and mercury. While the proposal has a few attractive features, it falls short of ambitious pollution reduction targets that could be met cost-effectively and which are warranted by public health concerns. Furthermore, "Clear Skies" leaves out caps on carbon dioxide.

Capping CO<sub>2</sub> as well as the other three pollutants—the "four-pollutant" approach—would be more effective overall because utilities would be encouraged to switch to fuels that are cleaner as well as less carbon-rich.

The administration also loosened New Source Review, a provision of the Clean Air Act that requires old power plants and other industrial facilities to upgrade pollution control equipment when they make modifications which result in increased pollution. The idea is to eliminate bureaucratic disincentives to power plant improvements. But in the absence of comprehensive legislation that would encourage retirement of old, dirty power plants, New Source Review helps level the playing field so that older facilities do not have a pollution subsidy giving them an unfair competitive advantage over newer, cleaner facilities.

The administration is talking about implementing more cost-effective, less bureaucratic approaches to air quality protection. However, the administration's actions raise well-founded suspicions that its real objective is to loosen standards, permitting power plants, refineries and other large facilities to duck responsibility for cleaning up the unhealthy pollution they emit.

## Air Quality Grade: D

**Ways to Improve:** A *truly* conservative policy would align public health and environmental concerns with business interests in reducing costs and increasing regulatory certainty. The administration should support “four-pollutant” legislation like that introduced by Senator Jim Jeffords in 2001 with support from senators in both parties. The bill, which is expected to be reintroduced this year, set aggressive emissions reduction targets and included “cap-and-trade” provisions rewarding utilities for implementing cost-effective cleanup projects. The bill included a deadline for all power plants to install state-of-the-art pollution control technology, which, in combination with the CO2 cap, would force old power plants to either clean up or close down. Finally, the bill included special provisions to prevent “hot spots” —the unhealthy concentration of pollution in any one locality.

## 4. Water Quality

The Bush administration has proposed a number of policies and rule changes that would weaken protection of America’s rivers, lakes and ocean waters.

The administration’s policy on toxic waste cleanup is to shift the financial burden from responsible parties that created the problems to the taxpayers. A special chemical tax that had funded the Superfund cleanup program expired in 1995. The fund is being spent down to pay for cleanup projects. Unless the tax is re-authorized, taxpayers will shoulder the entire burden of cleaning up toxic waste sites that endanger surface- and groundwater.

**Silver Linings:** The Bush administration ordered General Electric to quit stalling and clean up PCB pollution in the Hudson River. The administration has proposed modest improvements in the “no net loss” policy for wetlands. President Bush signed into law reauthorization of the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, which authorizes grants for habitat conservation and restoration. The administration supports promising experiments in market-based water pollution credits trading.

However, the administration has announced possible rule changes that could result in elimination of Clean Water Act protection for prairie potholes, vernal pools and other “isolated” wetlands—the predominant type of wetlands in arid regions—which provide important ecological services such as wildlife habitat, water storage, and flood prevention. The administration has proposed a regulatory change explicitly allowing “mountaintop removal” coal mines to dump waste rock into Appalachian river valleys. Also, the administration’s aggressive drive to expand coalbed methane wells in Montana and Wyoming—delighting industry by adding 51,000 new wells—has greatly concerned ranchers and local communities worried about pollution of the arid region’s water supplies.

## Water Quality Grade: D+

**Ways to Improve:** True conservatives believe that people and companies must

take full responsibility for their actions. The administration should support renewal of the special Superfund tax, to ensure that responsible parties pay for cleanup of toxic waste sites. In addition, the administration should do the following to protect the nation's water resources:

- Fully enforce the Clean Water Act's waste discharge, stormwater, and other provisions.
- Drop the rule allowing disposal of mountaintop removal mining waste into river valleys.
- Support legislation explicitly protecting prairie potholes and other "isolated" wetlands.
- Require strong water quality protection conditions for coalbed methane development.

More information is available in Republicans for Environmental Protection's [Water Quality](#), [Wetlands](#) and [Oceans](#) position papers.

## 5. Public Lands

Many aspects of this issue greatly concern those who seek to protect our finest natural lands for their clean air and water, wildlife habitat, historic heritage, and human enjoyment. It would be impossible to cover them all here. REP America's evaluation of the administration's policies focuses on four of those that we consider highly significant.

### A. Industrializing Public Lands

The Bush administration is aggressively pushing to industrialize wild lands that are among the finest examples of America's natural and historical heritage. The administration favors oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—President Eisenhower's finest environmental legacy and the largest unit in the National Wildlife Refuge system established by Theodore Roosevelt—which protects a stunning array of northern ecosystems and wildlife. The administration also favors opening many national monuments, national forest roadless areas, and other natural treasures to expanded energy development.

### B. National Forest Roadless Areas

About one-third of our national forests are "roadless." Such de facto wilderness areas provide vital services—including clean water for 60 million Americans—plus clean air, carbon storage, fish, wildlife, and recreation opportunities. Clearly, the previous administration's decision to ban additional roadbuilding—backed by overwhelming support from the American people—was a wise one from an environmental standpoint.

However, a policy barring new roads in national forest roadless areas is also a fiscally-responsible strategy. The Forest Service currently has a roads maintenance

backlog exceeding \$8 billion: a huge fiscal and legal liability burden to taxpayers.

An administrative rule barring most new roads on 58.5 million acres of roadless areas took effect early in 2001. When the off-road vehicle lobby and other special interests challenged the ruling in court, the Bush administration offered an exceptionally weak defense that the judge took note of in blocking the rule. Fortunately, the injunction was subsequently lifted by an appeals court panel, which ruled that the district court had abused its discretion. Between the district and appeals court rulings, the Bush administration sought to weaken the rule's scope through a series of administrative rules.

On Christmas Eve, the administration proposed a rule, since put on the Federal Register, that opens the door to approval of highway right-of-way claims on public lands, even in national parks and wilderness areas. The rule, stemming from an 1866 law, could result in 19th century wagon roads, burro tracks, and even dry streambeds being legally sanctioned by the federal government as highway rights-of-way, opening the door to an onslaught of off-road vehicles and development in the nation's most prized wildlands.

### **C. Yellowstone Snowmobiles**

In 2002, the Bush administration threw out a Clinton-era rule phasing out snowmobiles from Yellowstone National Park. Instead, it imposed a new rule that would actually expand snowmobile traffic, while requiring a gradual phase-in of machines with cleaner, four-stroke engines.

Snowmobile air pollution endangers park rangers, visitors and wildlife. Inefficient, two-stroke snowmobile engines dump unburned fuel directly onto the ground. Snowmobile noise frightens wildlife and degrades the natural experience most visitors seek in a national park.

### **D. Failure on Land Acquisition**

The president failed to deliver on his campaign pledge to enact the Conservation and Reinvestment Act (CARA), which would have provided generous long-term support for substantial, willing-seller land protection.

For some reason, the administration has been reluctant to embrace the wildly-popular practice of protecting open space, embracing instead the visionless, knee-jerk reactionary policies of just a handful of radicalized Western Republican politicians.

**Silver Linings:** President Bush signed into law four wilderness bills—expanding California's Ventana Wilderness, preserving desert lands in southern Nevada, protecting Colorado's James Peak and adding acreage to a preserve in South Dakota's Black Hills. Oil leases in Florida's Big Cypress National Preserve will be bought out.



Overall, however, the administration has no apparent vision for public lands beyond resource extraction. Opportunities to promote private land protection, such as full funding for the popular Forest Legacy program, have been missed. The administration's failures are an affront to all patriotic Americans who take pride in our country's wild heritage. They do a disservice to future generations.

## Public Lands Grade: D

**Ways to Improve:** Actions the Bush administration should take on public lands include:

- Reject new fossil fuel development on sensitive wildlands, including the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Rocky Mountain Front, national monuments, and roadless areas.
- Continue signing legislation expanding the National Wilderness Preservation System.
- Support protection of national forest roadless areas consistent with the 2001 rule.
- Reject all road right-of-way claims within national parks, wilderness areas, national monuments, and public lands qualifying for wilderness designation.
- Restore the rule phasing out snowmobiles from Yellowstone National Park.
- Fully enforce President Nixon's 1972 executive order setting sensible limits on off-road vehicles on public lands.
- Expand land acquisition and open space protection.

More information is available in Republicans for Environmental Protection's [Public Lands](#) and [National Forests](#) position papers.

## 6. National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

Republicans for Environmental Protection is greatly concerned by a series of Bush administration efforts that will undercut the National Environmental Policy Act. This vital "sunshine law"—passed in 1970 with strong Republican congressional support and signed by President Nixon—requires the federal government to study the environmental impacts of its actions, analyze alternatives, and subject its findings to public scrutiny. Often referred to as the Magna Carta of environmental laws, NEPA is a "look before you leap" safeguard that enables the public to keep an eye on its government and blow the whistle on damaging projects. Weakening NEPA is a prescription for a dangerous expansion of government power, enabling politicians and bureaucrats to do as they wish in secret with little accountability to the public.

For example, the administration's "Healthy Forests Initiative," much of which the President is implementing by executive fiat, will exempt timber-cutting projects from full-scale environmental review if they are advertised as "thinning projects to reduce wildfire risk." The policy would permit "stewardship contracts," which have wide potential for abuse because they would permit timber companies to cut large, fire-resistant trees in exchange for thinning brush and small trees with little

commercial value. Prominent scientists—including Jerry Franklin, the University of Washington’s nationally known forestry expert—have cautioned against blindly implementing a one-size-fits-all thinning policy that could actually worsen fire danger in certain types of forests.

The administration’s proposed national forest planning regulations would allow the Forest Service to avoid studying the environmental impacts of its forest management plans and would loosen wildlife conservation standards. The changes would lead to “don’t ask, don’t tell” mismanagement and careless expansion of commercial activities such as logging and fossil fuel production in our national forests, at the expense of conservation. Ten Republican congressmen recently wrote a letter publicly questioning the proposal and asking for an independent scientific review.

The administration also has argued in court—unsuccessfully so far—that NEPA does not apply to ocean waters in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone, 12 to 200 nautical miles offshore. If the administration ultimately prevails, marine resource extraction activities, such as offshore oil drilling, could be carried out without environmental reviews.

The White House Council on Environmental Quality has established a NEPA task force, which says it is reviewing ways of making NEPA more “efficient.” Many conservationists fear “efficiency” will be a cover for making the law less effective.

### **NEPA Grade: D-**

**Ways to Improve:** While government agencies should always strive to carry out environmental reviews more efficiently, the Council on Environmental Quality must avoid changes that depart from the necessity of full disclosure, public involvement, and reliance on the best available science. Streamlining of environmental analysis through techniques such as “tiered analysis” and “categorical exclusions” should be employed cautiously, erring on the side of more disclosure and public involvement, not less. Environmental analysis can be complex, but so is the natural environment that provides essential services upon which we depend.

Other actions the administration should undertake include:

- Rework the “Healthy Forests Initiative” and national forest management regulations, including addition of full environmental analysis of thinning projects and national forest planning activities.
- Rescind proposals to eliminate environmental reviews for activities in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone offshore.

## **7. Farm policy**

The 2002 farm bill has a number of positive environmental features, including increased funding of land, water and wildlife habitat conservation programs for farmers. It also includes funding to expand production of fuels and electricity from crop and livestock materials.

However, Congress added big increases in commodity crop subsidies, bloating the bill into a \$180 billion monster that will cause environmental harm as well as enlarge the federal deficit. Market-distorting commodity crop subsidies encourage crop overproduction, which in turn results in soil erosion, water pollution, and lost wildlife habitat.

In 2001, Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman released a remarkable report calling for significant farm policy reforms, including more support for conservation.

While the 2002 farm bill provided significant increases in farm conservation programs, President Bush should have put up a stronger fight against the budget-busting commodity subsidies that were added to the bill by congressional porkmeisters.

### **Farm policy grade: B-**

**Ways to Improve:** President Bush should support full funding of authorized farm conservation programs, seek expanded research and commercialization of farm-based energy technologies, and press for reductions in commodity subsidies through international trade negotiations and/or other forums.

## **8. Major Appointments**

Over the last two years, Republicans for Environmental Protection has praised the appointment and/or actions of **Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Christine Whitman, Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, National Parks Director Fran Mainella** and **Fish & Wildlife Director Steve Williams**. All have been responsible conservation leaders.

Unfortunately, administration higher-ups have often ignored or overruled them on critical issues, as in the spring of 2002, when Whitman was prevented from issuing an official warning about home insulation products containing a particularly dangerous form of asbestos used in millions of American homes.

Most of the key environmental and resource management positions within the administration, however, have been given to men and women who:

- worked for industries that actively exploit our nation's resources, creating clear conflicts of interest;
- came from organizations hostile to environmental protection; and/or
- compiled poor records on environmental issues in other positions.

The most egregious examples of bad appointments include:

- **Interior Secretary Gale Norton**, a protégé of James Watt who built a career working for organizations hostile to environmental regulations
- **Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham**, whose close ties to the auto industry make it unlikely that he will ever support substantially stronger auto-fuel efficiency standards.
- **Norton's deputy Stephen Griles**, a former coal industry lobbyist;
- **Assistant Interior Secretary Rebecca Watson**, a former mining industry lobbyist;
- **Agriculture Undersecretary Mark Rey**, a former timber industry lobbyist;
- **John Graham**, administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, who led a risk analysis center funded primarily by chemical, auto, and other manufacturing corporations with a financial stake in regulatory policy.
- **Allen Fitzsimmons**—who believes that “ecosystems exist only in the human imagination”—as head of wildfire prevention for the Interior Department.
- **Stanley Suboleski**, a top executive of Massey Coal who was appointed to the Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Commission despite the fact that Massey had dumped 300 million gallons of coal slurry into creeks and rivers in Kentucky and West Virginia, ruining private property, polluting water supplies and imposing a hugely expensive, years-long cleanup.

### Appointments Grade: D-

**Ways to Improve:** Only a thorough housecleaning will suffice to restore credibility to the agencies managing America's natural heritage and protecting the nation's environment.

President Bush should sweep the anti-conservation ideologues and conflicts-ridden lobbyists out of his administration, and replace them with Republicans with solid conservation credentials, on a par with **William Reilly** and **James Ridenour** (both of whom served with distinction in the administration of President George H.W. Bush) or **Gifford Pinchot** (President Theodore Roosevelt's forest service chief).

### A Challenge and An Invitation...

Overall, with a few exceptions, the Bush administration has compiled an extremely poor environmental track record. This comes at a time when America's natural heritage and our air and water supplies need greater protection, not less. The president's blatant lack of interest in tackling the problem of global climate change jeopardizes our children's future in a world where natural life support systems are under increasing pressure. Seldom has concern for the environment been more needed, and seldom have the American people seen less of it from their president.

The tragedy is that the administration either cannot or will not see that conservation and environmental protection are consistent with traditional conservative values and concerns, including fiscal responsibility, limited government, economic development, national security, self restraint and

responsibility to future generations

**Republicans for Environmental Protection challenges President Bush to rethink and reform his environmental policies. The stakes—including the political stakes—are truly enormous.**

We urge President Bush to take to heart the profound insight and moral authority of Theodore Roosevelt—his predecessor exactly a century ago—who said:

***"Conservation is a great moral issue, for it involves the patriotic duty of ensuring the safety and continuance of the nation."***

Those words of wisdom are every bit as true today as they were in TR's time. History has judged President Roosevelt very well.

Republicans for Environmental Protection believes that future Americans will judge President George W. Bush far less kindly if he leaves them a legacy of polluted rivers, lakes and oceans; unbreathable air; greatly increased global temperatures with the havoc they will bring; native species driven to extinction by reckless land-use policies; and destroyed natural lands.

Republicans for Environmental Protection stands ready and willing to help the Bush administration improve its environmental track record in the second two years of his term.

**We invite the president's staff to contact us if they wish to leave a legacy that future generations will praise.**