

## Case 6

On October 15, 2003, the Bush administration announced relaxed regulations on antipollution upgrades to old factories, refineries and power plants. This revision affects 17,000 plants that lack the latest antipollution technology. On the old policy, plants were required to install new antipollution technology during substantial facility-wide rebuilds, but not when conducting routine maintenance. Therefore, proponents argue, plant owners actually had a strong motivation to avoid making substantial upgrades, thus hamstringing the installation of antipollution equipment and degrading air quality.

Supporters of the new policy also say it's good for the economy. At a press conference held at a coal fired power plant south of Detroit, President Bush said: "When we talk about environmental policy in this Bush administration, we don't just talk about clean air, we also talk about jobs. We can do both."

Environmentalists are highly critical of the new policy, asserting that the Bush administration is sacrificing public health for political expediency. Pennsylvania and Michigan—states President Bush lost to Al Gore in 2000—were highlighted on his tour promoting the new environmental agenda, and where economic downturns have made job security one of the top issues for the next election. Moreover, industry made significant contributions to the Bush presidential campaign and the GOP during the 2002 election—\$14.6 million from oil and gas interests and \$11 million from the electricity industry, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Opponents of the new policy say that it allows dirty plants to avoid making improvements and hence exacerbates pollution and acid rain problems. Senator John Edwards of North Carolina has called the new legislation a "gift to polluters." Mark Van Patten, President of the National Wildlife Federation, says the rules allow big polluters to duck their environmental responsibilities: "By widening the loophole that has allowed old coal-fired power plants to avoid modern pollution controls for 30 years, this reckless action makes it more difficult to protect people and wildlife from the other major impacts of these power plants, including the buildup of toxic mercury contamination in the nation's waterways and the mounting toll of global warming."

Environmentalists argue that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) should be given more authority to enforce clean air standards, not less. A study done by the White House Office of Management and Budgets concluded that between 1992 and 2002, the nation saved somewhere between \$120 billion and \$193 billion in hospital costs, premature deaths and lost work days because of clean-air regulations. Consonant with free-market economic policy, the Bush administration counters by arguing that the new policy lessens governmental interference.

Supporters of the new policy state that alarmism about air quality is unfounded: air

pollution has dropped 48% since 1970, and acid rain has dropped 41% since 1980. Yet, even as evidence seems to point towards a general decline in pollution, it is not clear whether this trend will continue under the Bush administration's new environmental policy.

Initially, Attorney General John Ashcroft promised not to back off from lawsuits brought against refineries and plants that had violated the Clean Air Act during the Clinton Administration. However, on November 6, 2003, the EPA announced that it would drop investigations of 50 power plants for past violations of the Clean Air Act.

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