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An Environmental Deficit

To the country's environmentalists, the most encouraging thing about President Bush's new budget is something that isn't there. Having painted himself into a fiscal corner, Mr. Bush has muted his support for an energy bill that would have disproportionately benefited large polluters with \$31 billion in tax breaks and other incentives. This is good news, assuming that Congress heeds his call for restraint. In most other respects, the environment fared poorly in this budget — not surprising, given Mr. Bush's failure to mention the issue in his State of the Union address, but disheartening just the same.

Though publicly uncomplaining, Michael Leavitt, the new administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, has reason to be particularly aggrieved. Only two months into the job, he saw his budget whacked by \$600 million, or 7 percent. Much has been made of the trims in his research budget. Of greater consequence to the country's near-term health were the 30 percent cuts to waste treatment programs and other clean water activities that are central to his agency's mission.

The budget is also at odds with two campaign pledges that Mr. Bush probably wishes he had never made. One was to fully finance the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the government's main tool for creating and preserving parks, forests and wildlife refuges. The administration claims to have provided the entire \$900 million authorized by Congress; strip away the accounting gimmicks, and the figure is \$314 million. Mr. Bush's other promise was to provide \$4.9 billion to eliminate the huge repair backlog in the national parks. Though he has increased the Park Service's operating budget, the backlog largely remains.

The administration's skewed priorities affected even the Agriculture Department's conservation programs. Money was added to a program of dubious environmental value, the president's Healthy Forests initiative, which could end up promoting needless logging in the name of fire suppression. Meanwhile, money was subtracted from activities of proven value, like the wetlands reserve program, as well as other initiatives aimed at encouraging conservation, protecting wildlife habitats and rewarding sustainable farming.

Analysts with forensic skills will find bright spots: a \$287 million stimulus for FutureGen, the Energy Department's promising effort to build the world's first coal-fired power plant with virtually no pollution, and more money for cleaning up the Great Lakes and protecting northern forests.

Such bright spots are rare. Indeed, Mr. Bush could wind up making his biggest contribution by resisting Senator Pete Domenici's efforts to revive the energy bill. Even the slimmed-down version Mr. Domenici is now promoting would underwrite old, polluting technologies that would do little to ensure a more secure energy future. Its cost is further obscured by fiscal tricks. One hopes that this will prove too rich a combination for our suddenly budget-conscious president.