

Earth Day and the president

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Make no mistake, the president of the United States is always welcome in Maine.

It's his environmental policies — and the pollution they allow to blow into our state — that are unwelcome here.

The president, who often vacations at his family's compound in southern Maine, obviously recognizes the state's environmental legacy and natural beauty. That's why, on Earth Day, today, he's visiting Wells.

It doesn't require a presidential visit, however, to find out the facts about the impact of President Bush's policies on Maine. Just ask his EPA administrator, Michael Leavitt, who last week announced that eight of Maine's counties and most of the coast, including Acadia National Park, have air quality below federal smog standards.

While it's true that heavy summer tourist traffic contributes to the problem, most of that pollution rides the winds into the state from the Midwest, where dirty coal-fired power plants

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spew a toxic cocktail of particulates into the air.

Under this administration, tough regulations in the Clean Air Act have been rolled back to favor polluting industries.

Standards for mercury pollution are being revised, putting the health of young children needlessly at risk. Already, Mainers are warned not to eat too much fish from the state's lakes and rivers because of mercury contamination. The problem will only get worse if the administration has its way.

And that's just the beginning. Maine already has the highest rate of childhood asthma in New England and one of the highest adult rates in the country. According to the American Lung Association of Maine, 128,000 people in the state suffer from the disease; 28,000 of them are children.

Doctors don't know how to cure asthma, but they do know how to manage it. External factors, like second-hand smoke and the pollution that causes smog, contribute to the disease and make it much worse. On bad air days, those who suffer the most are ostracized from their lives, confined to the indoors.

According to Lewiston doctor Andrew B. Carey, who specializes in the treatment of allergies and asthma, pollution makes asthma worse and increases the seriousness of the symptoms.

Former Maine Sens. Edmund Muskie and George Mitchell were tireless advocates for cleaner water and cleaner air. Current Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins have shown their mettle by standing up to a president of their own party on the environment. But the assault continues.

Air and water are cleaner today than they have been in the recent past. The country is making progress. But the president's environmental directives move us in the wrong direction and greatly slow further improvements.

The White House says the president's visit today is not a campaign stop. He's on official business. Maybe. But politics certainly plays a role.

Political observers already know that Maine is one of 18 battleground states in the race between Sen. John Kerry and President Bush. The president lost Maine by just 5 points against Al Gore and has been advertising here for weeks.

The environment matters to Maine voters, and the state works hard on pollution control. **But we need help** from the federal government because much of the pollution we have to deal with floats into the state from away.

Our hope is the president hears that message on his visit.

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