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## Air pollution con game

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The United States has achieved large declines in air pollution during the last few decades, yet polls show most Americans think air pollution has been getting worse. A misleading new report by the Public Interest Research Group helps explain why.

PIRG cooked the pollution books to mislead Americans into thinking air pollution is bad and getting worse, when just the opposite is the case.

PIRG's "Danger in the Air" is the latest in a series of recent activist group reports intended to scare Americans into believing they're seriously harmed by current air pollution levels, and that they should support more draconian and expensive regulations.

PIRG doesn't want Americans to know that progress on air pollution has been nothing short of spectacular. San Bernardino, Calif., the smoggiest area of the country, exceeded federal health standards for ozone smog on more than 130 days per year during the 1980s. Today, that number is down to around 15 to 30 times per year and dropping. That success was repeated across the nation. Of the more than 1,000 government ozone-monitoring sites, only 46 percent met federal health standards in the early 1980s. Today, 86 percent meet the standards. Those gains occurred at the same time that Americans increased their automobile use by 75 percent.

PIRG didn't want to tell that story. So it artificially inflated pollution levels. For example, PIRG's report proclaims, "During the 2001 ozone season, the national health standard for ozone smog was exceeded on no fewer than 4,634 occasions." That's a shocking number. But it has nothing to do with anyone's pollution exposure. According to government data, areas that exceed the federal ozone health standard do so an average of about three days per year.

Even in areas with the highest ozone, PIRG's claims are a gross exaggeration. For example, PIRG asserts California exceeded the federal ozone standard 241 times in 2001, in effect telling 34 million Californians that they're breathing dangerous air on two of every three days. Yet most areas of California had no more than a few ozone exceedances in 2001, and even Crestline, with the worst ozone in the state (and nation), had 27.

Air pollution will only continue to improve. Cars and trucks account for the majority of ozone-forming pollution. But thanks to technological progress, newer vehicles start out cleaner and stay cleaner as they age, compared to older models. On-road pollution measurements show that, as a result, average vehicle emissions are declining about 10 percent a year, ensuring continued clean-air progress.

Once again ignoring inconvenient facts, PIRG nevertheless claims clean air laws are under assault and that recent Bush administration regulatory proposals to revamp "New Source Review" (NSR) would allow industrial facilities "to emit millions of tons of additional smog-forming pollutants" into the air. If true, this would represent an increase of as much as 25 percent to 50 percent in industrial pollution emissions. PIRG doesn't include any analysis on how that could happen. That's no surprise, because it couldn't happen.

NSR requires that "best available control technology" be installed on new industrial facilities, and on older facilities that make a "major" modification to their equipment. The Bush NSR proposal wouldn't change NSR at all for new sources. For older sources, it would streamline procedures and relax somewhat the definition of a "major" modification.

If the Bush NSR plan increases emissions at all, it might be by a few percentage points at some older facilities. More likely, NSR reform will encourage modernization at older facilities, increasing energy efficiency and reducing emissions. Ironically, most of the Bush NSR proposals had already been promoted by the Clinton administration, but without the associated alarmist rhetoric from environmental groups.

Regulatory issues aside, PIRG never explains how a few existing older facilities could increase production by the severalfold factors necessary to cause such large increases in overall industrial emissions. PIRG's errant claims also ignore the ongoing declines in vehicle pollution-the major cause of ozone smog.

Ironically, PIRG's deceitful report could end up reducing Americans' overall health and safety. Encouraged to overestimate the danger of current air pollution levels and the prospects for future reductions, Americans may demand additional unnecessary regulations. But regulations increase the price consumers pay for goods and services, draining families' resources for other needs like food, health care, education and entertainment. When society wastes effort on small or nonexistent risks, fewer real problems get the attention they deserve.

"If you torture the data enough, it will confess to anything," goes a cautionary statistics joke. PIRG seems to have adopted this maxim without a trace of irony.

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