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Earth Day Doomsayers Need to Get Their Facts Right

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By Sally C. Pipes

With all the reminders to recycle, shrink our carbon footprint, and reduce our consumption of goods, just about everyone feels guilty on Earth Day.

Indeed, if you listen to the three presidential candidates, you couldn't be faulted for thinking that a cabal of greedy oil executives was bent on putting the future of our planet at risk.

But planet Earth is doing just fine. And it's the world's richest countries — led by the United States — that are doing the most to preserve and protect the environment.

Take this: Over the last 30 years, air pollution emissions from American manufacturers have fallen by about 60 percent, even as real manufacturing output has increased by 70 percent, according to a recent study from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER).

Data from the Environmental Protection Agency show that there's been a 60-percent reduction in levels of sulfur dioxide, the chemical that causes acid rain, in the eastern United States since 2000. And there's been a 50-percent drop in emissions of nitrogen oxide, a prime contributor to respiratory illness.

In Los Angeles, air-quality regulators have noted a significant decline in health risk from air pollution. In the 1970s, Los Angeles residents went through nearly 200 high-risk pollution days each year. These days, the city has fewer than 25 annually.

There's good news on the ground, too. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently reported that the United States has been gaining wetlands at a rate of about 32,000 acres per year over the last decade.

American water resources have enjoyed a resurgence as well. Rare fish species have returned to the Detroit River for the first time in nearly a century. But what about global warming? Isn't the United States single-handedly turning Greenland into a tropical paradise?

Not really. Al Gore's "Inconvenient Truth" looks to have been little more than "convenient fiction." U.S. greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions actually fell by 1.5 percent in 2006 -- a first for a non-recessionary year.

Meanwhile, Europe's finger-wagging on climate change hasn't matched its actions. Between 1997 and 2004, the last year for which relevant data are available, GHG emissions from Kyoto Protocol signatories increased 21.1 percent. Emissions from non-Kyoto nations, by contrast, increased only 10 percent.

And from the United States? Just a 6.6-percent increase.

Unfortunately, the public dialogue on this issue is dominated by environmental doomsayers who ignore these facts. And they're spearheading all sorts of dangerous regulatory efforts. All three presidential candidates have promised to push for restrictive anti-global-warming measures if elected.

Case in point: the increasingly popular goal of reducing worldwide GHG emissions by 80 percent by 2050. At least a dozen U.S. states — including New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts — have signed onto the program, either through an executive order or non-binding resolution.

Al Gore supports this proposal. And he may have the opportunity to implement it nationwide, as Barack Obama has expressed interest in adding Gore to his cabinet, if elected. But Obama and Gore fail to realize that mandating a drop in emissions of that magnitude by 2050 would wreak havoc on the economy.

The rush to rein in GHG emissions is all the more backwards when you consider that America's environment has improved precisely because of the nation's economic growth.

Growing economies allocate resources more efficiently and produce new technologies that strengthen their ability to control pollution. Hard-and-fast caps on emissions amount to hard-and-fast caps on growth, making everyone poorer and handicapping one of the best ways to improve the environment.

So as you celebrate this Earth Day, remember that the sky isn't falling. The reality is that America is making great strides in its quest to improve the environment.

Sally C. Pipes is president and CEO of the Pacific Research Institute, which publishes the Index of Leading Environmental Indicators each year on Earth Day.