

Ecology is for life, not just jobs

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Not long ago air pollution was blamed on killer trees. Seriously. Former U.S. president Ronald Reagan's chief of staff, Donald Regar, claimed that trees fouled the air. Smokestacks, car exhausts, industrial fumes, he tried to make us believe, have caused no problems. Trees were the villains.

That kind of crazy talk has been muted in the White House though given half a chance John Sumnu, President Bush's Donald Regar, would soon revive it. A month ago he failed, by a mere whisker, to kill the Clean Air Act that Canadians hope will clean up acid rain.

Sumnu is not alone. Many disincarnate roam along the Potomac. The struggle for a cleaner environment can never stop because one person's pollution is another person's profit.

For example. Because herbicides are very profitable, chemical industry giants such as Monsanto and BSAF now stand accused — not by any court but by a private organization — of promoting scientifically fraudulent studies minimizing dangers associated with their use.

This particularly nasty case involves

dioxin, a byproduct of herbicides, papermaking, waste incineration and several other industrial processes. Dioxin is one of the most toxic synthetic chemicals known to science.

Greenpeace, the aggressive environmental advocacy organization, petitioned the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday to "revoke all past decisions based on these studies." Greenpeace says new scientific evidence shows dioxin to be far more toxic to humans than previously thought.

Reputable scientists have disagreed about dioxin for years and are not likely to reach common ground just to please Greenpeace. But corporate profits are not the only reason for the impasse. Scientific reputations are at stake. The U.S. government could be liable for billions of dollars in damages if the courts found that dioxin gave people cancer while federal regulators winked at scientific fraud.

No, the issue of environmental responsibility is not going to be settled. But not all is bleak. People are beginning to realize the economic cost of pollution is too serious to be left to conventional economists.

Slowly but surely, an emerging economic discipline offers some hope. Call it "ecological economy" — a method of factoring

all expected costs into business or policy decisions.

For example, we no longer build smelter pulp mills in cities because it costs too much to clean up. The same logic applied to most business decisions. That's ecological economics.

It is a reasonable assumption that global warming, poisons in ground water, the ozone hole, oil pollution, and acid rain is corrosive — destroying before our eyes architectural jewels such as Prague and Cracow, would not be as severe had the link between the ecology and economics been acknowledged 30 or 50 years ago.

Instead, like John Sumnu of the world keep saying: Money is money. If push comes to shove, the White House has said repeatedly, concerns about the economy will top environmental considerations.

But we can wake up even the brain-dead in politics. Rattle them roughly enough until they see that ecological economics can work — that the cost-benefit analysis of any major economic decision must include probable cost of ecological consequences.

With luck national governments everywhere will wake up in time.

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