



# On Earth Day, Remember Who Pollutes the Most

## Don't Leave the Federal Foxes Guarding Our Environment

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Wednesday marks the anniversary of Earth Day, the international holiday meant to celebrate the natural environment, and the preservation thereof. Many have taken to using this day to [call for](#) ever-more top-down environmental management, but they should do so with caution.

The US federal government has a long and often tragic history when it comes to environmental stewardship. Of all days, Earth Day is one where all US citizens should stop to assess the horrific environmental damage that has happened as a direct result of federal action.

As I've [noted](#) in this space before, the US federal government is one of the largest, if not the largest, polluter on the planet. This pollution comes both directly, with government agencies directly harming environmental quality, and indirectly, with pollution-inducing policy.

How can a government that expects businesses and the public to comply with a tangled web of environmental protection laws do so much harm itself?

This is partly because much of the environmental bureaucracy is almost wholly beyond the control of politicians and the general public. A case in point is the Department of the Interior, an agency designed to manage federal lands, which has provoked [regular environmental scandals](#) for more than 100 years.

The agency has long been protected by little other the fact that it appears to be one of the most dull, uninteresting parts of the federal bureaucracy. Reforming the Interior Department is not an

issue that a politician can easily campaign on. If anything, disrupting the many vested interests could cost more votes than it wins.

This is a classic example of the concept of [concentrated benefits and dispersed costs](#), where those who benefit from reform, such as taxpayers, would only be minimally helped, while certain groups, such as ranchers, loggers, or recreational users, stand to lose a great deal. Bad policy, once implemented, persists for years due to simple bureaucratic inertia.

Or take the Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps, [best known](#) for its engineering projects such as levees and dams along rivers, and maintaining the nation's harbors, has done more to destroy sensitive habitats than nearly any group, public or private, in the nation's history. It has [destroyed](#) innumerable wetland areas in the name of channeling rivers like the Mississippi. Its engineering works have combined with FEMA's (Federal Emergency Management Agency) National Flood Insurance Program to encourage people to live in environmentally fragile coastal areas.

And then there's counterproductive policy. With nearly every policy area, it is easy to find examples of policy that encourages environmental destruction. Trade? The sugar tariff has [encouraged](#) sugarcane farming on many miles of wetlands in Florida and damaging runoff from farms. Agriculture? Water subsidies to farmers [encourage](#) farming marginal lands and water-intensive crops in California.

Defense? Military bases are often [massive polluters](#), and the inability of politicians to close excessive bases keeps the damage coming for years. Transportation? Energy-intensive mass transit such as rail lines are a [costly way](#) to reduce emissions, if not outright counterproductive. Even our national parks are not innocent, as their historic failure to charge high-enough user fees for access means [crowding](#) and [damage](#) to some of the nation's environmental treasures.

Both direct damage and policy failures show that the federal government is no environmental angel. If anything, its misguided work can do more harm than good. That is not saying that private actors do not pollute, but at a minimum they are held accountable for the damage they cause. This rarely happens when the the federal government is at fault.

As we stop to celebrate Earth Day, it's high time that we to hold government to account for the counterproductive policies it enacts, and the direct damage it continues to do. No group, public or private, should get away with doing this much damage. Just because it's the government polluting, it doesn't make it any less harmful to people, the environment, or the planet as a whole.