

Karen Telleen-Lawton: The Murky Air Act and Gutting the EPA

The EPA is our means to achieve economic health and to ensure environmental health for future generations

By [Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist](#) | Published on 06.14.2010

Long, long ago — back in the 1970s — [Santa Barbara's oil spill](#) and [Rachel Carson's](#) seminal book *Silent Spring* inspired legislation including the [Clean Air Act](#) (1970) and the [Clean Water Act](#) (CAA, 1972), and the formation of the [Environmental Protection Agency](#). These moves signaled not a failure of the free-market system but a realization that industry needed to begin facing the external as well as the internal costs of their processes.

Corporate interests and their political arms have been toiling ever since to shed those responsibilities. In the latest attempt, Alaska [Sen. Lisa Murkowski](#) led a [Senate](#) debate June 10 on a measure designed to strip the EPA of its authority to regulate carbon pollution and hold manufacturers accountable. Coming in the midst of the most catastrophic environmental disaster in U.S. history, it was an incredible move. [David Yarnold](#), president of the [Environmental Defense Action Fund](#), said, “You can’t make this stuff up.”

The EPA is as flawed as any large agency, public or private, attempting to solve intractable problems and please diverse constituencies. But its accomplishments are pretty convincing.

In “[The Benefits and Costs of the Clean Air Act, 1970 to 1990](#)” (1997), the EPA found that the economic value of clean air programs was 42 times greater than the total costs of air pollution control during the

20-year period. Accounting for effects on industrial production, investment, productivity, consumption, employment and economic growth, the EPA estimated total benefits of \$22.2 trillion against total costs of \$523 billion – a net benefit of about \$21.7 trillion.

A [second mandated review](#) completed in 1999 showed that by 2010, the Clean Air Act will have prevented 23,000 premature American deaths related to asthma and prevented 67,000 hospitalizations related to acute bronchitis, among other illnesses. The economy was saved 4.1 million lost work days.

The Clean Water Act has many successes as well, though its effect has been hampered by new chemicals, old infrastructure and limited tools against nonpoint pollution. According to a 2009 conference report by [The Johnson Foundation](#), “increasing stresses from unregulated development, population growth and climate change” further hamper gains of earlier decades.

Fortunately for the health of supporters and detractors alike, the Senate rejected the bill on a 53-47 vote. [Sen. Barbara Boxer](#), chairwoman of the [Senate Environment and Public Works Committee](#), announced in a discussion leading up to the vote, “We’ve got to stop this attack on science and health.”

[Steve Cochran](#) of the [Environmental Defense Fund](#) weighed in afterward: “This shows that the majority of the Senate understands the need to act to address America’s global warming pollution.”

Long ago, we were willing, with perhaps some short-term justification,

to sacrifice long-term environmental and economic health. But for all the murky waters, the [BP blowout](#) has clarified one thing: The short and long terms have converged.

Without a healthy environment, there can be no healthy economy. The EPA is our vehicle, as citizens, to see that the environment passes to our descendants in at least as good health as when we inherited it. We have failed miserably in the past century, but we can improve much faster if activists for a healthy economy will take their rightful place alongside activists for a healthy environment.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*