Congress tries to block EPA from protecting waters

Over the last decade, polluters have been able to chip away at key protections in the Clean Water Act, leaving waters across Florida—including those that flow into the Everglades—in need of stronger protections from pollution.

The Everglades shelters the endangered Florida panther, manatees and crocodiles; it’s also critical in replenishing the drinking water supply for millions of Floridians. Unfortunately, pollution from development and agribusiness is pushing the Everglades to the brink.

The good news is that the EPA is moving to restore critical protections for waters across Florida, and to create new rules to limit pollution from development. It’s an important advance for our waters, but far from a done deal given opposition from polluters and attempts by some members of Congress to block the EPA from doing its job.

EPA targeted by polluters

Earlier in the year, lobbyists for factory farms, developers, and other polluters got their allies on Capitol Hill to include a number of amendments that strip environmental protections as part of the budget process. Among the amendments was one that would slash funding for preventing sewage overflows and block the EPA from taking action to restore Clean Water Act protections.

Environment Florida and our allies across the country worked to expose the polluter influence behind the amendments, and to show broad public support for clean water protections. On March 9, the Senate rejected the budget package containing these anti-clean water amendments by a margin of 56-44, but there is little doubt that polluters will try again soon.

Environment Florida’s next steps

This summer, Environment Florida’s citizen outreach staff will build support among Floridians for new rules that will require low-impact development and limit overall pollution to help restore the Everglades.

We hope to show the EPA the backing it needs to forge ahead and update protections for our waters—despite attempts by polluters and their allies in Congress to block this progress.

Purple Gallinule bird.

To learn more about the threats facing the Everglades, and to find out what you can do to help, visit our website: www.EnvironmentFlorida.org
Recent action

2010 was breakthrough year for solar

In an otherwise lackluster year for the economy the solar industry shone brighter than ever in 2010, with a 67 percent increase in the amount of solar energy projects installed across America compared to 2009.

That means more homes and businesses powered by pollution-free solar energy, an increase made possible by strong solar policies implemented at the urging of Environment Florida’s office in Washington, D.C., and our partner groups around the country. In December, Clean Energy Advocate Sean Garren led our charge in Congress to extend critical incentives for solar power, while staff here in Florida helped secure funds for Florida’s popular solar rebate program.

Environment Florida and our affiliates continue to strategize with entrepreneurs within the solar industry to hit a far more ambitious benchmark: getting 10 percent of our nation’s energy from solar by 2030.

National update: America’s Great Outdoors

Last year, when President Barack Obama asked for input on what the federal government should do to protect our country’s natural heritage, Environment America’s state affiliates responded with plenty of good ideas.

Environment Maine pushed for the park service to purchase the last pieces of unpreserved land within the borders of Acadia National Park. Environment Montana called for an end to drilling on the outskirts of Glacier National Park. Here at home, Environment Florida worked to protect and preserve the wetlands of Everglades National Park for generations to come.

President Obama recently announced he’d seek the renewal of the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, a critical tool if we’re to undertake many of these initiatives. Our staff is currently building support for the approval of the conservation funding in Congress.

To our members

We’re closer than ever to winning new clean water rules to limit pollution into the Everglades—but we can’t back down now. For more than a year, our staff has been working alongside our sister groups across the country to convince the EPA to establish new rules to protect our waters. We’ve spoken to hundreds of thousands of people nationwide to build support, and the work is paying off.

Right now, the EPA is on the verge of announcing new rules that would go a long way toward limiting the pollution that plagues a quarter of the Everglades. But big polluters and their friends in Congress have noticed our progress—and they’re fighting back, hard.

As some in Congress consider whether to block the EPA from doing its job, I hope you’ll join us this summer is showing your support for clean water.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Ouzts
Regional Program Director
There’s no doubt that the Clean Air Act, which turned 40 in 2010, has improved the health and well-being of millions of Americans. Its protections are credited with saving the lives of 160,000 Americans in 2010 alone.

Of course, air pollution remains a pressing health threat in Florida and the rest of the country, a stark reminder of the work still left to do. As a result of heart attacks, strokes, asthma attacks and other fatal conditions brought on or exacerbated by air pollution from power plants, over 13,200 Americans have lost their lives. It is estimated that one in six women of childbearing age has enough mercury in her bloodstream (a byproduct of coal power production) to put her child at risk should she become pregnant.

Thankfully, the Obama administration has announced it will seek to strengthen and update portions of the Clean Air Act in the coming months.

An assault on our health
With some vocal opponents of the Clean Air Act throwing their weight around in Congress, Environment Florida and its counterparts across the country, the American Lung Association and other public health organizations are building support to make sure the administration’s proposals go through.

In April, Environment Florida’s Sarah Bucci released a hard-hitting examination of one of the most pervasive air pollutants: ozone. That report, “Dirty Energy’s Assault on our Health,” found that Florida’s power plants ranked fifth nationwide for emissions of ozone-forming pollutants in 2009, emitting more than 94,000 tons of nitrogen oxides in that year alone.

“Environment Florida is absolutely right that the quality of air we allow our children to breathe is a health issue, not a political issue,” said Congressman Ted Deutch of Florida’s 19th congressional district, who joined Environment Florida for the release of the report. “For the sake of our environment, our economy, and our future, it is time for the United States to fast track our transition to clean, renewable sources of power.”

A taste of things to come?
In February, the House of Representatives attached a provision to a federal funding bill that would have blocked the Environmental Protection Agency from cutting mercury pollution from cement plants, cleaning up soot pollution, and reducing carbon dioxide from coal-fired plants.

After this setback, Bucci and her colleagues around the country worked to convince dozens of newspapers to editorialize in support of the Clean Air Act. Environment Florida publicly criticized the members of the Florida delegation who voted to erode the Clean Air Act.

Less than a month later, the Senate, including Sen. Bill Nelson, rejected the funding bill, with many senators citing the environmental and public health attacks within the bill as one of the reasons for their opposition.

Should we be concerned about America’s 104 nuclear plants posing similar risks to our children’s health and our environment? Based on our analysis, yes. At its most basic level, Mother Nature proved stronger than the best safeguards that Japan could design. Why would we be different?

Environment Florida is urging the Obama administration and others to improve the safety of existing nuclear plants, declare a moratorium on new plants, and begin to responsibly phase out our use of nuclear power in favor of clean, renewable energy, like wind and solar power. For more, visit www.EnvironmentFlorida.org.
This fall, the Obama administration dropped plans to open Florida’s coast to oil drilling until 2017—a notable victory for which we worked tirelessly. But Environment Florida’s work to protect our beaches is far from over. In coming months, staff and supporters will redouble their efforts to win a permanent ban on drilling in Atlantic waters and maintain existing protections for the Eastern Gulf Coast.

Environment Florida is also working to start pushing sensible choices, like using less oil by increasing fuel economy, increasing funding for public transportation, and planning for better, smarter transportation systems.

“Opening our shores to drilling would only put our beaches and coastal waters at great risk for a small, short-term supply of oil and gas,” said Sarah Bucci, state associate for Environment Florida. “We can do better.”

An Environment Florida report confirms that Florida beaches are worth four times more to the state than potential oil revenue.

Read more online.