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A CONSERVATIVE APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL PRINCIPLES

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INTRODUCTION

The lyrics of the classic hymn “America the Beautiful” – written by the poet Katharine Lee Bates during an 1893 trip to Pike’s Peak¹ – testify to the natural splendor of the United States. But it is sometimes underappreciated that among those who most want to preserve those “amber waves of grain” and “purple mountain majesties” are many who also believe strongly in the country’s other lasting inheritance – a free market.

Reducing our impact on the environment is a fundamentally conservative principle. Rather than seeing people as separate from nature, or inherently harmful to the environment, conservatives understand that stewardship of the land honors nature as both bounty and beauty. Conservatives believe you should have the freedom to choose how to live, but take responsibility to pay for the impact you cause. Just as conservatives understand that punishing criminals for their crimes

1. The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, “America the Beautiful,” 1893,” accessed Aug. 3, 2016. <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/art-music-and-film/resources/%E2%80%9Camerica-beautiful%E2%80%9D-1893>

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is superior to blanket gun-control regulation, we believe those who put pollution in a stream should pay for the loss of clean water and opportunities to fish.

Alas, that core conservative principle has not always translated into a consistent environmental agenda. Ever since the early 1970s, environmentalism has been synonymous with left-wing, big-government policies. From the expanding authority of the Environmental Protection Agency to numerous state and local regulations, the voices of those who revere nature, but are skeptical of expanding regulation, have been lost. This has created problems both for conservatives and for the environment.

In the public imagination, concern for the environment has become virtually synonymous with calls for increased government regulation. As a consequence, any time an environmental problem arises, the public immediately looks for more regulation or more taxes. Conservatives themselves appear to have internalized this connection, leaving right-of-center legislators with few policy options to address environmental concerns in ways that do not expand the size and scope of government.

Without an alternative approach to environmental policy, conservatives can feel boxed in, forced to claim environmental problems either are a “hoax” or not as serious as environmentalists claim. This is, indeed, sometimes the case. But where there is real pollution or other problems of environmental degradation, the standard conservative line of defense is untenable. Lacking effective policy alternatives, each fight over environmental issues that conservatives lose necessarily means more government expansion. For those who believe in the American ideals of freedom and free enterprise, the path ahead is one of slow but inevitable retreat.

What relatively few realize is that the political left's reflexive preference for more regulation often has been demonstrated to be bad for the environment. Witness the poor record of the Endangered Species Act. Only 1 percent of listed species have recovered and, in some cases, regulations actually have actually encouraged habitat destruction. As noted by Michael J. Bean – former head of the Environmental Defense Fund's wildlife program and current principal deputy assistant secretary for Fish and Wildlife and National Parks at the U.S. Interior Department – in a 1994 address: “The red-cockaded woodpecker is closer to extinction today than it was a quarter century ago when the protection began.”²

The U.S. Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement – a pledge initiated by the City of Seattle in 2005 to reduce emissions to 7 percent below 1990 levels by 2012 – stands as another dramatic failure.³ Few, if any, of the more than 1,000 cities that ultimately signed the document ever even attempted to meet its carbon-reduction targets.

Conservatives and others who believe in the free market need an alternative to the failed 1970s environmental approach of ever-expanding government bureaucracy. Rather than simply refusing to acknowledge environmental risk, conservatives need approaches that honor our belief in personal freedom while demanding actual environmental results.

From cooperative approaches to market forces, there are several options that offer effective alternatives to the standard big-government approach. Outlined here is a priority list of approaches to environmental policy, beginning with cooperative and property-rights-based approaches and turning to regulation only when it is the only effective and reasonable option.

It is time for conservatives, many of whom surround themselves every day with the natural beauty described in “America the Beautiful,” to put environmental policy back on track. With these principles, we can, as the seldom-sung second verse says, make environmental policy: “A thoroughfare for freedom beat across the wilderness.”

PROPERTY RIGHTS AND COOPERATIVE SOLUTIONS

Television shows depicting Alaskan fishermen braving the waves and weather were popular for one reason: danger. In an effort to limit the number of fish caught, politicians

mandated a short fishing season. The strict time limit meant boat owners would have to go out in whatever the weather threw at them, catch as many fish as they could during a short period of time and hope for the best.

The problems with this system were numerous. The danger that made it compelling television also meant that, occasionally, lives were lost. In their hurry, fishermen also had to catch everything they could, leading to high levels of bycatch; that is, fish you aren't trying to catch, can't keep and, therefore, are mostly wasted. The uncertainties of the season also meant businesses could never predict how well they would do and often would have to use lots of fuel and other resources to find fish during that narrow window.

It was a broken system. An alliance of environmental advocates and free-market advocates argued for an alternative system built around property rights known as “catch shares.” Instead of catching everything you can in a window that lasts only a few days a year, the catch-share system allocated a property right to a percentage of the total catch. This allowed boats to sail any time during the year, when the weather was good or prices were high. With the ability to take their time, boats also switched to equipment that targeted only the species they wanted to catch, reducing the bycatch and the waste that went with it.

Despite making for less dramatic television, it's a system that has worked well and offers a lesson in how cooperative, property-rights based systems can more effectively solve what is known as the “tragedy of the commons.” A term coined by the ecologist Garret Hardin in 1968,⁴ the tragedy is found in cases where no one has ownership of the natural resource to be harvested. A fish left in the ocean may not be there next year to produce more offspring and repopulate. Instead, the fishing boat behind you will catch it this year, knowing there is no guarantee the fishing boat behind her won't do the same. A rush to resources ensues and the resource becomes overexploited.

The typical response to such circumstances has been heavy regulation. The first female Nobel laureate in economic science, Elinor Ostrom, noted that competition for resources often leads to calls for government intervention:

The presumption that an external Leviathan is necessary to avoid tragedies of the commons leads to recommendations that central governments control most natural resource systems. ... [Some have] opined that ‘iron governments,’ perhaps military governments,

2. Richard Stroup, “The Endangered Species Act: Making Innocent Species the Enemy,” Property and Environment Research Center, accessed June 18, 2016. <http://www.perc.org/articles/endangered-species-act-1>

3. American Legislative Exchange Council, “RESOLUTION ON U.S. CONFERENCE OF MAYORS CLIMATE PROTECTION AGREEMENT ACCOUNTABILITY,” July 1, 2012. <https://www.alec.org/model-policy/resolution-on-u-s-conference-of-mayors-climate-protection-agreement-accountability/>

4. Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science*, Vol. 162, no. 3859 pp. 1243-1248, December 1968. <http://www.dieoff.org/page95.htm>

would be necessary to achieve control over ecological problems.⁵

However, Ostrom notes that a look through history finds this approach yields poor results. “Instead of presuming that optimal institutional solutions can be designed easily and imposed at low cost by external authorities,” she argued that “‘getting the institutions right’ is a difficult, time-consuming, conflict-invoking process.” The best solutions often come from the competitors themselves. Ostrom found a number of reasons this is true. Critically, those closer to the problem have a better understanding of the problem and a commitment to effective enforcement. She notes:

Individuals located in an administrative center will find it far more difficult to make good judgements about relative benefits and costs of alternative rules, because many of those costs and benefits are not recorded and summarized in the information available to those external to the situation.⁶

Regulators will design rules that create onerous burdens without realizing how costly they are; they don’t have the information and don’t pay a price for bad rules. This is one reason she elsewhere had argued that successful voluntary systems must ensure that “those affected by the rules can participate in modifying the rules.”⁷

Solving these problems sometimes requires more than just assigning property rights, as was the case with catch shares. Whatever the approach, local knowledge regularly proves critical to set up stable rules that are fair and enforceable. Voluntary arrangements can be difficult to hammer out and may evolve over time, but they benefit from having both incentives and knowledge aligned to find a durable solution.

Recent concern about increased mortality of honeybees is a case in point. It began with reports of Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), which grew particularly acute between 2006 and 2010.⁸ The focus on CCD as a single cause has shifted in more recent years, as beekeepers continue to report high levels of colony loss from a variety of maladies, including infestations of varroa mites and nosema, a fungal parasite.⁹

Theories about the cause of hive loss abound, ranging from increased cell phone signals to those same varroa mites. Some point the finger at pesticides, despite science that is mixed at best. As a result, there have been calls to ban the neonicotinoids class of pesticides. These calls have been made on grounds that the chemicals, commonly known as “neonics,” are to blame. In 2013, the European Commission introduced restrictions on neonics,¹⁰ while some EU members have moved further in the direction of a full-blown ban. Earlier this year, Maryland became the first U.S. state to ban the sale of neonics to regular consumers.¹¹

But it bears noting that such calls do not come primarily from beekeepers. They stem instead from activists and regulators who often do not have either the knowledge or the incentive to identify problems accurately. For their part, beekeepers have been finding ways to increase the total number of hives, despite increased mortality of individual hives. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has found that commercial beekeepers, who have both an obviously strong financial incentive to keep their bees alive and significant exposure to pesticides, have lower levels of hive mortality than hobbyist beekeepers, who have less knowledge and less of a stake in losing their hives.¹² Solutions to reducing honeybee mortality are likely to come from beekeepers – not, as Ostrom notes, from politicians with little stake in the game.

Assigning property rights also can help determine the value of various environmental impacts and ensure the best allocation of resources. As the late Nobel laureate Ronald Coase observed, when there are few interested parties and transaction costs are low, negotiation between parties is the best way to allocate resources. The British journalist Matt Ridley summarized this argument, what economists call the Coase Theorem, this way:

In a dispute between (say) two people in Sussex, one of whom wants to drill for oil, while the other wants a pretty view, Coase explained that in a costless world, the winner could best be determined by negotiation, not regulation. If A values the view more than B values the oil, let A buy out B.¹³

5. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 9.

6. *Id.*, p. 195.

7. Jay Walljasper, “Elinor Ostrom’s 8 Principles for Managing a Commons,” *On the Commons*, Oct. 2, 2011. <http://www.onthecommons.org/magazine/elinor-ostroms-8-principles-managing-commmons>

8. Agricultural Research Service, “ARS Honey Bee Health and Colony Collapse Disorder,” U.S. Department of Agriculture, accessed Aug. 4, 2016. <http://www.ars.usda.gov/News/docs.htm?docid=15572>

9. Kirsten S. Traynor, et al., “Multiyear survey targeting disease incidence in US honey bees,” *Apidologie*, Vol. 47, Issue 3, pp. 325–347, May 2016. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13592-016-0431-0>

10. BBC News, “Bee deaths: EU to ban neonicotinoid pesticides,” April 29, 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22335520>

11. Lorraine Chow, “Maryland to Become First State to Ban Bee-Killing Pesticides for Consumer Use,” *EcoWatch*, March 25, 2016. <http://www.ecowatch.com/maryland-to-become-first-state-to-ban-bee-killing-pesticides-for-consu-1882199363.html>

12. National Honey Bee Health Stakeholder Conference Steering Committee, “Report on the National Stakeholders Conference on Honey Bee Health,” U.S. Department of Agriculture, October 2012. <http://www.usda.gov/documents/ReportHoneyBeeHealth.pdf>

13. Matt Ridley, “The economist, the market and the environment,” *The Times*, Sept. 5, 2013. <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article3860796.ece>

Such an example is not, in fact, theoretical. Many issues relating to resource or environmental impact are between two or a few interested parties.

Sometimes the agreements that leave everyone better off can be quite surprising. Free-market environmentalist Richard Stroup tells the story of the Paul J. Rainey Wildlife Sanctuary, a 26,000-acre refuge in Louisiana owned by the Audubon Society. For most of its 92-year history, Audubon sold oil leases in the sanctuary to earn revenue to buy other lands and maintain the sanctuary. Stroup notes:

For nearly 50 years, the Audubon Society allowed an oil company to operate 13 wells in the sanctuary. The company had to comply with strict stipulations such as no pumping during the nesting season. In exchange, Audubon earned more than \$25 million and was able to buy additional land for conservation with its profits.¹⁴

The leases ended in 1999, when the Audubon Society decided against renewing them. While there has been discussion about entering new leases to raise funds to fight beach erosion, no agreement has been reached. But that's the nature of such negotiations. Perhaps when oil prices increase, Audubon will find the revenue generated, combined with environmental protections, will make a future agreement worthwhile.

For conservatives looking for environmental solutions, cooperative and property-rights-based policies are the best place to start. They are best at combining respect for individual freedom with environmental effectiveness.

But not every environmental problem is suited for this approach. Where there are a limited number of interested parties who have incentives to protect a resource, the lessons of Ostrom and Coase provide a good guide to finding effective, fair and enduring environmental solutions.

MARKET INCENTIVES TO REDUCE WASTE AND POLLUTION

When more than a few people cause environmental harm, the situation is sufficiently complex to require broader solutions. Mitigating the environmental impact stemming not from a few people, but thousands or millions, inevitably means the cost of negotiating an agreement among all interested will be too high. In such circumstances, a simple and transparent price on pollution becomes a better option.

14. Richard Stroup, "Reflections on Saving the Wilderness," Property and Environment Research Center, June 1, 2010. <http://www.perc.org/articles/reflections-saving-wilderness>

Simple and transparent fees can be the best approach where a large number of individuals each contribute a small environmental impact. Rather than dictating behavior, putting a price on pollution provides an incentive to individuals to reduce their impact. Just as important, individuals can take responsibility for their impact in a way that best suits them, preserving their individual freedom.

This approach is consistent with the conservative principle that says people should take responsibility for their own behavior, including the environmental impacts they cause. Rather than socializing costs – putting government in charge of deciding who pays and how the money is used – linking environmental harm with responsibility is more effective and fair.

One notable example is the National Park Service. Despite the popularity of the National Parks, many face serious maintenance backlogs. Nationwide, there is an \$11.9 billion backlog of projects – in some cases, leading to open sewage in the park.¹⁵ These backlogs aren't just at the small, less popular parks. The Grand Canyon, Mount Rainier and other popular sites have backlogs. The problem is that visitor fees do not come close to paying for the maintenance. As a result, taxpayers subsidize millions of visitors each year who do not pay for the impact they cause.

The result is not surprising for anyone familiar with systems where benefits, like hiking in the park, are privatized but costs are socialized and paid by others. Working Americans who do not get the opportunity to visit National Parks should not be asked to pay the freight for those fortunate enough to visit the parks regularly, putting a burden on the system. It is simply unfair to treat both the same way.

It is also ineffective. By putting a disproportionate share of the costs on taxpayers, parks become reliant on congressional appropriations to ensure they have the funding to maintain the parks. In some years that may work; in others, it does not. As noted by former House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior Chairman Ralph S. Regula, R-Ohio, back in 1999: "It's not very sexy to fix a sewer system or maintain a trail. You don't get headlines for that."¹⁶

The result is a system that fails to deliver the benefits it promises. Rather than separate the impact from the responsibility, fees on pollution or environmental impact provide an opportunity to pay for the damage, while discouraging activities that do more damage and come with a higher cost.

15. Sam Turner, "National Parks are crumbling with \$11.9 billion maintenance backlog, but there's a plan to rescue them," *Deseret News*, March 9, 2016. <http://newsok.com/article/5483302>

16. Michael Janofsky, "National Parks, Strained by Record Crowds, Face a Crisis," *The New York Times*, July 25, 1999. <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/25/us/national-parks-strained-by-record-crowds-face-a-crisis.html>

Some conservatives express concern about raising fees because they do not trust government agencies to spend the sums wisely. In the case of National Parks, they are right to be concerned that maintenance costs more than it should and that funding does not flow to where it would be best spent. But this reasonable concern does not justify the current system of socialized costs and private benefits. There are two key questions: first, “who pays?” and second, “how much?”

This basic principle that people should pay for the impact they cause can be applied to a wide range of environmental issues. Indeed, it is the best approach to reduce environmental harm at the lowest cost.

Today’s environmental problems are dramatically different from those of the 1970s. As Bill Ruckelshaus, the first director of the Environmental Protection Agency noted:

In 1970, when the EPA was first started, the estimate of its water-quality office was that 85 percent of the problems of water pollution in the country were large point-source discharges, like municipal sewage-treatment plants or industrial operations. Only 15 percent were nonpoint sources—the runoff from city streets, suburban lawns, and rural and farm areas.¹⁷

As Ruckelshaus noted in 2010, those proportions are now almost entirely reversed. The EPA now estimates is that 15 percent of the problem is point sources, and 85 percent of the impact is nonpoint sources. That reversal means the regulatory approach of the 1970s is simply ineffective and cannot address the distributed nature of the environmental issues we face today.

Rather than regulation, which tends to be one-size-fits-all, putting a price on pollution gives people a range of options to find the best way to reduce their impact. That may in some cases mean changing behavior. In other cases, it will mean developing new technology that allows us to live the life we choose while reducing our environmental impact.

The fees people pay for garbage are illustrative of this principle. The price people pay for each can of garbage provides an incentive to reduce the amount of waste in a variety of ways. People can reuse and repair tools or appliances they might otherwise have thrown away. They can sell them at a garage sale or give them to family. They can purchase reusable utensils rather than disposable forks. Or, they can pay the price, understanding they can only do a certain amount to reduce the trash they produce.

17. William Ruckelshaus, “A New Shade of Green,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 17, 2010. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303410404575151640963114892>

Some conservatives have opposed such fees on pollution, arguing they are just another way to tax the public and spend money on the left-wing agenda. There are plenty of examples where liberal politicians have done exactly this. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, who environmental groups have dubbed the “greenest” governor in the nation, has opposed any climate policy that doesn’t include new taxes. To avoid abuse by craven politicians, pollution-pricing schemes should meet some additional tests.

First, they should be revenue-neutral. For example, conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer argues for raising the federal gas tax by \$1 a gallon and reducing the FICA portion of everyone’s payroll tax by \$12 a week.¹⁸ Former Nixon Treasury Secretary and Reagan Secretary of State George Schultz has proposed a tax on sources of carbon dioxide and other emissions, which then would be returned to taxpayers in the form of dividends.¹⁹ Harvard University economist Greg Mankiw, former chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers under President George W. Bush, likewise has proposed taxing carbon emissions and using the money to reduce sales taxes, income taxes or other taxes.²⁰ Pollution prices that reduce the overall tax burden or eliminate taxes that harm the economy and employment, would both be good for the economy and provide a disincentive to pollute.

Additionally, prices on pollution should replace costly and ineffective regulations where possible. Regulation is often the most expensive way to achieve a policy goal. Mankiw has contrasted a using a gas tax to reduce energy dependence with the Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards that require car manufacturers to improve the efficiency of their fleet. He notes:

Congress has tried to reduce energy dependence with corporate average fuel economy standards. These CAFE rules are heavy-handed government regulations replete with unintended consequences: They are partly responsible for the growth of SUVs, because light trucks have laxer standards than cars. In addition, by making the car fleet more fuel-efficient, the regulations encourage people to drive more, offsetting some of the conservation benefits and exacerbating road congestion. A higher gas tax would accomplish

18. Charles Krauthammer, “Raise the gas tax. A lot,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 8, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/charles-krauthammer-raise-the-gas-tax-a-lot/2015/01/08/5b4b407c-976f-11e4-aabd-d0b93ff613d5_story.html

19. George P. Schultz, “A Reagan approach to climate change,” *Washington Post*, March 13, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-reagan-model-on-climate-change/2015/03/13/4f4182e2-c6a8-11e4-b2a1-bed1aeea2816_story.html

20. Amanda Little, “This conservative economist makes the case for a carbon tax,” *The Grist*, Oct. 12, 2015. <http://grist.org/climate-energy/this-conservative-economist-makes-the-case-for-a-carbon-tax/>

everything CAFE standards do, but without the adverse side effects.²¹

Replacing the costly CAFE standards with a gas tax would reduce costs to the economy while achieving the same goal.

Finally, putting a price on environmental impact must only occur when there is actual environmental risk. For many on the left, environmental damage has become the catch-all excuse to justify new taxes and regulation. Putting a price on environmental damage makes sense only if there is actual environmental damage. The legitimate concern is that the left invents environmental concerns to justify new taxes. This is certainly true. However, the situation obliges conservatives to discern between real environmental concerns and phony environmentalism.

However, conservatives should not oppose fees on environmental damage solely because they have on occasion been associated with the left's expansionary agenda. Conservatives would not oppose fees on individuals who pour sewage into a stream. Indeed, we support paying utility fees to treat sewage so it does not go into the water. Conservatives do not oppose fees on hunting ammunition to pay to keep land available for wildlife so future hunters can enjoy the sport. Grants disbursed from the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Account are designed specifically to connect hunters with the costs of maintaining the land where they hunt.²²

Alternatively, where there already is environmental regulation, conservatives should work to replace costly command-and-control approaches with more efficient prices on pollution. This is true even where the underlying environmental impact is questionable, reducing the economic damage in those circumstances where it is politically impossible to eliminate needless regulation entirely. In recent years, several cities have banned plastic shopping bags, despite the damage from those bags being extremely small.²³ Replacing those bans with a small fee on the bags would not solve the problem with the policy. It would, however, allow people to continue to have a choice about what bags work for them and would reduce the regulatory costs associated with enforcing the bag ban.

Putting a price on pollution is not a panacea. It should be the second option, employed when and where a property-rights or voluntary solution is not appropriate. But it is consistent with the conservative principle of assigning personal

responsibility to those who harm others. From fees for trash to paying the cost of treating sewage, conservatives already support numerous examples of such pollution fees. They are a great counter and alternative to the excessive regulation that dominates environmental policy.

REGULATION AS A LAST RESORT

Even though it is the last resort, there are times when regulation is the best option. When atmospheric lead was identified as a serious pollutant, the federal government phased out leaded gasoline. The result was an 89 percent reduction in lead levels between 1980 and 2010, as inexpensive alternatives took the place of lead in the fuel.²⁴ Regulation worked to reduce lead levels quickly because the source of the pollution was simple and easily identifiable. In such circumstances, regulation can actually be the best option.

But such circumstances are not the norm. In many cases, regulation poses very high costs and a low success rate. One reason regulation so frequently fails is that rules frequently are written to satisfy political goals rather than environmental ones.

The Obama administration has been a strong advocate of subsidies for solar manufacturers, with the purported goal of reducing the cost of renewable energy. Having risked billions on developing a solar industry in the United States, the administration was put in the position of using government regulation to protect the money it spent. In the wake of the failure of Solyndra, the administration didn't want another high-profile bankruptcy of a solar manufacturer. As a result, the administration imposed tariffs on China's solar manufacturers. This had the effect of driving solar prices up – the opposite of the original goal.

Regulation is poor at addressing pollution that is distributed and comes from a wide range of sources. Such regulation can often create unintended consequences, requiring additional regulation to “solve” the problems created by the original overregulation.

On the other hand, where regulation can be simple, targeting a few polluters responsible for significant levels of impact, it can be the best option. The Reagan administration recognized this when it phased out chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in an effort to reduce ozone depletion. President Ronald Reagan's Council of Economic Advisors produced a study showing the cost of phasing out CFCs was low and the potential

21. Mankiw, Greg, “The Pigou Club Manifesto,” Greg Mankiw's Blog, Oct. 20, 2006, <http://gregmankiw.blogspot.com/2006/10/pigou-club-manifesto.html>

22. Federal Aid Division, “The Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act,” U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Jan. 21, 2010. <https://www.fws.gov/southeast/federalaid/pittmanrobertson.html>

23. Todd Myers, “Should cities ban plastic bags,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 8, 2012. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390444165804578006832478712400>

24. Environmental Protection Agency, “Lead in Outdoor Air,” accessed June 20, 2016. <https://www.epa.gov/lead/lead-outdoor-air>

health benefits were large.²⁵ Since alternatives to CFCs were available, the administration supported a regulatory phase-out. The number of sources of CFCs was relatively small and phasing them out was fairly simple to enforce.

Applied poorly, however, this approach has serious limits and comes with high costs. The number of times when regulation is the best option is tightly circumscribed, but given the right circumstances, it should not be ruled out entirely.

CONCLUSION

Across the country, many conservatives are stewards of the land, caring for the land that produces the amber waves of grain and fruited plains. While the environmental left often praises a life close to nature, like that depicted by Henry David Thoreau in “Walden,” the distribution of political beliefs in the nation’s rural areas – whether forests, wetlands, mountains or plains – suggests it’s conservatives and those who believe in the free market who actually live that life more closely.

For years, the left has claimed the high ground of environmental debates, dominating the discussion about how to address with environmental concerns. Despite the failure of many of their ideas, they continue to define the debate, because conservatives have not offered effective alternatives, policies based in personal freedom and responsibility. It is time to change that.

When addressing legitimate environmental concerns, conservative policymakers should work through a prioritized approach to reducing pollution. Where there are a limited number of entities and negotiation costs are low, a voluntary or property-rights approach can find solutions that work best for those involved and for the environment. Where pollution is distributed over a large number of people, a simple and transparent fee attaches personal responsibility to environmental impact, provide an incentive to reduce pollution and offers the personal freedom to choose how to avoid that fee.

Free-market principles offer an effective alternative to the political and regulatory approaches of the 1970s. By putting those who have the incentives and best information at the center of environmental solutions, we not only can preserve the environment we care about, but also take power back from the bureaucratic mire that is sacrificing the American ideal of freedom for the sake of control.

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25. David Cook, “ETHERIAL CONFLICT: THE FORMATION, PROMOTION, AND DEFENSE OF THE UNITED STATES’ NEGOTIATING POSITION FOR THE MONTREAL PROTOCOL ON SUBSTANCES THAT DEplete THE OZONE LAYER,” University of Colorado Conflict Research Consortium, Working Paper 94-56, February 1994. http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/full_text_search/AllCRCDocs/94-56.htm