

EARTH DAY 2020 IS OBSCURED BY COVID-19

April 21, 2020

Today is Earth Day. As this article gets written in the midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic on April 22nd, the country celebrates the 50th Anniversary of this day that was officially set aside to remember the importance of protecting the environment. Although most of us are at home fixated on the impacts of COVID-19, it is important that we put some time aside to affirm that the goal of addressing environmental issues is more important than ever before.



A lot has happened since that first Earth Day in the spring of 1970. On that day half a century ago, I remember being part of a panel of speakers at an Earth Day celebration at Wilmington College. Since urban studies was then my academic specialty, I remember focusing my remarks on the need to work on cleaning up the air and other industrial pollutants that were an unhealthy reality of U.S. cities.

Earth Day 1970 was an initial public acknowledgement that this country confronted major challenges in addressing a badly polluted environment. Even in the midst of heated debates about the Vietnam War, a bi-partisan spirit existed when it came to taking on environmental issues. A Republican President, Richard Nixon, and Congress enthusiastically endorsed this day to remember our responsibility to the environment.

Several months after the first Earth Day, Congress passed the Clean Air Act, and in 1972, it enacted the Clean Water Act. Next came the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency, a Cabinet level agency with the responsibility of enforcing these laws. During this same period, many states established EPAs to focus specifically on problems existing in their regions.

With the EPA in operation and with general public support for environmental protection, significant steps were made to improve the environment in the time period since the first Earth Day. Besides EPA enforcement of air and water regulations, citizens also cited these regs when providing evidence in law suits against industrial polluters that were endangering the health of their neighborhoods and communities. Environmental attorney David Altman, based in Cincinnati, has effectively used these federal regs in numerous cases involving major corporate polluters.

Despite the steady progress in this country since Earth Day I, much more must be done. Scientists have warned of the dangers to our planet of global warming, and new evidence of this growing crisis piles up almost on a daily basis. Even



though, he confronted a divided Congress for most of his eight years in office, President Obama made global warming one of his top issues. He was able to strengthen regulations on automobile emissions in the U.S., and he was a key leader in promoting the Paris Accord, a Treaty dedicated to reducing Green House emissions that was signed by diverse governments across the globe.

Then along came the Trump Administration. Since the President took office in January 2017, he seems to be dedicated to a policy that protecting the environment is a major hindrance to his slogan - "Make America Great Again." Since he rejects as false the Scientific studies about global warming, he see no need for any new actions on this front. In fact, he loudly withdrew from the Paris Accord Treaty six months into his Presidency.

The Trump Administration also seem hell bent on trashing air and water regulations previously enforced by the EPA. Trump's appointment of Andrew Wheeler, a former coal industry lobbyist, to head this agency, really put the fox in charge of the hen house. There has been a steady weakening of EPA regs including the higher auto emission standard imposed by the Obama Administration. The Endangered Species Act has been weakened as well as a long standing clean water regulation. Meanwhile, Wheeler disbanded the EPA's Science Panel, and imposed guidelines that reject most environmentally related health studies.

Thus, Earth Day 2020 is not only occurring during the COVID-19 Pandemic, but it comes during a major retreat from national policies to improve the environment. People who are concerned about the environment and climate change better use their current time at home girding up for this fall's Presidential campaign. Another four years of this President's policies may just make it impossible for this country to take any meaningful steps to reduce the global perils that most reputable scientists are predicting. Earth Day will then seem like some meaningless ritual celebrated by ineffectual dreamers.