

# Pouring salt on Gulf of Mexico's wounds

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With flashbulbs popping in Naples earlier this month, environmental officials from the White House and five states bordering the Gulf of Mexico announced that they will now work together to clean up the Gulf.

It made for some nice headlines and TV sound bites about a slickly named "Ocean Action Plan," initiated by Gov. Jeb Bush and backed by President George W. Bush. Sadly, the plan is a string of vague goals that will likely generate some fat expense reimbursement checks for fancy meetings, but hold little promise for real progress. An honest effort would begin with an acknowledgement that both Bushes have been lax in enforcing environmental laws. If we enforced the laws on the books, the Gulf would be healthier right now.

The first big meeting was at Naples' Rookery Bay. A Florida Department of Environmental Protection press release describes the "pristine estuarine waters of Rookery Bay."

Pristine? Far from it. Rookery Bay is polluted because Florida and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have failed to protect it, just like they have failed to protect the dozens of waterways that dump into the beleaguered Gulf. Instead of enforcing the Clean Water Act, our regulators are protecting polluters who wreck our beaches and public fishing grounds. Even some of the sessions at the Naples meeting were closed to reporters and the public -- the very public that uses the Gulf!

Bush's plan for the Gulf has goals like "cooperation" and "identifying and characterizing Gulf habitats." But the reality, just like the truth behind the mirage of a "pristine" Rookery Bay, is different. Rookery Bay's fish have mercury contamination. The electric power industry, a major source of mercury pollution, has played a key role in weakening clean-water protections. The agencies complied with industry wishes.

To protect the Gulf, we must protect the wetlands that filter runoff. But regulators have done nothing. A *St. Petersburg Times* investigation found that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has rubber-stamped permits to fill wetlands in Florida more than any other state. In 2003, for example, the Corps approved 3,400 wetland-destruction permits and rejected just one. EPA, DEP and the Corps could stop this. Instead, they bend to developers time after time.

The EPA, now trumpeting the "Ocean Action Plan," floated a different plan this year to allow partially treated sewage to dump into waterways during high rains -- which in Florida is most of the time. Citizen outrage, and the threat of lawsuits, killed this scheme.

The EPA and Florida also gave permission to take polluted phosphate waste from a bankrupt plant near Tampa, load it onto barges, and dribble it all over the Gulf of Mexico at taxpayer expense. Soon after that, we had dolphins washing up on Gulf beaches, dead by red tide.

Now, the EPA and Florida are ready to let paper mills build pipelines to move their waste further toward the Gulf. The paper mills have already poisoned smaller waterways so badly that fish are changing sex. Even when dumped in larger waterways, DEP will have to give the paper mills exemptions from many water-quality requirements to justify new permits.

When pressured to go after polluters, regulators resorted to a paperwork fix: They simply deleted still-contaminated streams from the official cleanup list. Poof! Conservation groups had to go to court to get the Clean Water Act enforced.

We all want a clean Gulf. We have laws to stop this pollution. Too bad we've got window-dressing instead of political will.

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