



PUBLIC INTEREST INSTITUTE FACT SHEET

Number 03-10

September 23, 2003

Breathe Easier: Air Quality is Getting Better

Many Americans believe that the quality of the air we breathe is getting worse and will continue to decline, even though air quality has actually improved dramatically in recent decades.

- Recent polls found that 66 percent of Americans believe air pollution has gotten worse during the last ten years, and 75 percent expect environmental problems to worsen in their lifetime.¹
- However, the just-released 2002 Trends Report from the Environmental Protection Agency shows that “since 1970, aggregate emissions of the six principal pollutants (carbon monoxide, lead, nitrogen dioxide, ozone, particulate matter, and sulfur dioxide) have been cut 48 percent. During that same time, U.S. gross domestic product increased 164 percent, energy consumption increased 42 percent, and vehicle miles traveled increased 155 percent.”²
- One mid-1960s model car generated the same amount of air pollution as twenty of today's new cars.³
- The “wealth effect” accounts for part of the improvements achieved in air quality. As a country's economy grows, more resources and capital are available for quality of life expenditures, rather than concentrating resources on acquiring basic necessities. One of these quality of life expenditures is improving our environment, including the quality of the air. As less-developed countries begin to improve economically, they will begin to devote more of their wealth to this improvement.⁴

Sources:

¹Joel Schwartz, “Air Quality in U.S. Continues to Improve,” *Environment & Climate News*, Heartland Institute, September 2003, p. 8; and “Progress vs. Pessimism: Environment Doing Better Than Most Realize,” *Viewpoint on Public Issues*, Mackinac Center for Public Policy, May 8, 2000, No. 2000-17.

²U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Air Trends, <<http://www.epa.gov/airtrends/>> (September 18, 2003).

³Foundation for Clean Air Progress, Air Pollution Facts, <<http://www.cleanairprogress.org/clean-air-pollution/air-pollution-facts.asp>> (September 18, 2003).

⁴Steven Hayward, Elizabeth Fowler, and Laura Steadman, “Environmental Quality 2000: Assessing Michigan and America at the 30th Anniversary of Earth Day,” *Mackinac Center Report*, Mackinac Center for Public Policy, April 2000.

By David Hogberg and Amy K. Frantz, Research Analysts

public.interest.institute@limitedgovernment.org Phone: 319-385-3462 Fax: 319-385-3799