

In the wake of our march to war with Iraq, too little attention has been placed on the rush to exempt the Department of Defense from most of America's major environmental laws. This is more than another misguided assault on the environment by the Bush administration; it is a significant missed opportunity for the military.

The US Department of Defense is the nation's largest polluter and generator of Superfund in America. From the radioactive legacy at Hanford, WA to the toxic residue of our chemical weapons testing and manufacturing around the American University campus in Washington, DC, every state struggles with the problem. More exemptions are not going to help. A lack of controls created this toxic legacy across America in the first place.

These exemptions will cost money. Much of the tens of billions of dollars spent to clean up after the Department of Defense are the result of delay and lack of commitment.

States will be forced to step in where the Federal Government has left off.

Failure to invest in the technologies of clean-up will put lives at risk; land mines and unexploded ordnance kill people at home and abroad each day.

The sprawl that vexes communities around the country hits hard at the military. Isolated areas that were once perfect for testing weapons and training soldiers are now victims of our headlong rush for urban development.

Sprawl is one of the greatest challenges to military readiness as civilian uses encroach upon and around military ranges and bases.

For too long, Congress has been missing in action in this critical area.

It should not just reject the Bush administration's ill-conceived, but cleverly timed effort.

Now is the time for Congress to help the military fulfill its environmental obligations. As the finest fighting force in the world, our military achieves astounding results.

All they need are direct orders and adequate resources.

Why not put them to work to enhance and protect the environment rather than to create more environmental threats in the future while we ignore the current challenges of today?

Since I came to Congress, I've been fighting to at least inventory the areas that are blighted by unexploded ordnance, to put somebody in charge and to incrementally increase funding for clean-up and research. As a gusher of money flows to defense, just half the budget slated for the ill-conceived National Missile Defense program could revolutionize military cleanup. Instead of a rate of spending that will take centuries, we could finish the job in a few decades.

In the long-term, investing in clean up can actually save substantial amounts of money. As technologies develop and economies of scale are achieved in environmental clean-up efforts, there will be a wide-range of civilian contractors willing, able and indeed eager to expand their business.

Additional money for research will do far more than merely hasten clean-up and lower costs.

It will have profound implications not just for soldiers, but for children and farmers who are killed and maimed as a result of unexploded ordnance and land mines.

This doesn't just happen overseas; it is a little known fact that over 60 American civilians, including children, have been victims.

At a time when we are deeply concerned about our economy, these investments will provide tens of thousands of family-wage jobs. Accelerated clean up will speed the return of some of America's most interesting, scenic and valuable properties to productive use.

It is not just fear of job loss that keeps between a quarter and a third of domestic bases surpluses to our military needs in operation. Communities fear that they will lose economic security and be left with a "white elephant" surrounded by barbed wire and a cyclone fence.

The Fort Ord base on the California coast contains some of the world's most spectacular landscapes. After thirteen years and hundreds of millions of dollars spent since its closure, the land has still not been fully returned to productive use.

Twenty years ago, a bipartisan coalition of "cheap hawks" helped make some significant reforms of military weapons procurement. Today, "hawks" who care about the environment, the budget, and military readiness should embrace bold, environmental military action.

Congress should firmly reject the anti-environmental, unnecessary initiative of the administration, and instead give the money and the instructions for the Department of Defense to clean-up after itself.

It will boost the economy, save taxpayer money and enhance the environment.

It will improve military readiness at home while it enhances the safety of soldiers and civilians around the world.

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