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By Lawrence Solomon

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"Damn your conscience, spittle! Remember— if we don't pollute, someone else will!"
We can't shift the blame

Effects of the free trade deal with the United States on our standards are neither all good nor all bad.

By Lawrence Solomon
The writer is executive director of Environment Probe

Question: In the one year since the free trade agreement took effect, has the deal done anything to harm -- or help -- the Canadian environment?

"Not that I've noticed," says Pollution Probe's executive director, Michael Manolos.

The free trade deal is way down there on the list of things that have happened to the environment in the last year," says Elizabeth May, an environmental lawyer and former adviser to the federal minister of the environment.

May, who was neither for nor against the deal, believes environmentalists still don't have enough information to assess its impact properly, particularly since a change as sweeping and complex as free trade is bound to affect the environment adversely in some areas and positively in others.

MISPLACED NATIONALISM: In the case of pesticides, for example, where "Canada has been far more likely to allow a dangerous pesticide in use," she sees Canada's environment as the winner if the free trade deal forces our standards up to United States levels. U.S. complaints about Canadian subsidies that allow the forest industry to harvest un-economic stands may limit resource exploitation, while on the minus side she worries about the erosion of the National Energy Board's power to stop energy giveaways.

"We're not aware of any positive things," says CELA lawyer Stephen Shrybman, listing in contrast eight areas -- everything from pesticides to lead solder in cans -- where free trade threatens the environment.

CEL A disputes the view that U.S. standards tend to be higher, arguing that fundamental differences between the political systems in the two countries -- ours based on ministerial responsibility and theirs on division of powers -- makes comparisons unfair or irrelevant.

What does matter, according to Shrybman, is the ability of multinationals to "whipsaw governments" by threatening to move plants to countries with lower environmental standards if we don't downgrade our own. And although unable to cite any specific examples where environmental standards were, in fact, lowered through this form of corporate blackmail, Shrybman is convinced that this practice is commonplace, and is being accelerated with free trade.