

and not see a frog anywhere,” reported a researcher from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Describing the polluted San Joaquin River as a “witch’s brew” of toxins, environmentalist Bill Jennings warned: “A world not safe for frogs and butterflies won’t be safe for children.”

As with all things environmental, the protection of endangered species was subject to shifting political currents. Republican governor Pete Wilson authorized the relaxation of a wide range of environmental regulations to foster the creation of “jobs, jobs, jobs.” Among the regulations under assault was the landmark California Endangered Species Act. Defenders of the CESA were outraged. A lobbyist for the Sierra Club charged Wilson with caving in to the state’s agribusiness and timber interests: “This provides opportunities for the governor’s supporters to mow down more endangered species.” By contrast, proponents of biodiversity heralded Democrat Gray Davis as the best environmental governor the state had ever had. “He’s brought about a major shift in environmental protection in comparison with his predecessors, Pete Wilson and George Deukmejian,” noted the director of the California League of Conservation Voters (CLCV). The league was especially pleased by Davis’s support in 2000 for two of the largest conservation bond measures ever approved in the nation’s history. “The public’s approval of these bonds,” said a spokesperson for the Nature Conservancy, “makes our task of protecting the state’s biological diversity much more feasible.” Environmentalists gave Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger mixed reviews. Encouraged by his early legislative initiatives, including a bold new plan to protect endangered marine habitats, the CLCV in 2004 credited him with having “the potential to be a mold-breaking pro-environmental Republican governor.”

On the national level, California environmentalists expressed grave concern when the administration of Republican George W. Bush weakened key protections of wildlife habitats. Democratic congressman George Miller accused the Bush administration of sacrificing endangered species for the benefit of its wealthiest “clients.” An Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., a senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, charged the administration with “quietly putting radical new policies in place that will let its corporate cronies poison our air, foul our water, and devastate our wild lands for decades to come.” A spokesperson for the Defenders of Wildlife was particularly alarmed by the threat to larger species such as bears, wolves, and elk. The Bush administration’s acceleration of logging was simply “not going to provide enough land for these species to hang on.” The California League of Conservation Voters ultimately ranked Bush as “the worst environmental president in our history.”

Growth Control

The environmental movement, although its roots lay deep in California history, represented a radical reversal of traditional values. Throughout the state’s history, growth has been thought of as the greatest good, but the environmentalists denounced unrestricted growth as a menace to the quality of life. Beginning with a Petaluma ordinance in 1971 limiting construction of new residential units within the city to 500 per year, communities across the state took steps to limit their population growth. Builders criticized th

Petaluma measure as a “no-growth” plan and challenged its constitutionality, but in 1976 the United States Supreme Court upheld the ordinance. During the next two decades, California voters approved more than 1500 slow-growth measures.

The recession and attendant slowdown in population increase in the early 1990s temporarily reduced the intensity of the growth-control issue. As the California economy rebounded later in the decade, local communities became divided once again between progrowth and antigrowth forces. Affluent enclaves on the west side of Los Angeles, for instance, remained fiercely antigrowth, whereas poorer neighborhoods in the eastern and southern parts of the city were desperate for development. Encouraged by the economic boom of the late 1990s, progrowth forces scored victories from Ventura to Glendora, from Tracy to Monterey. The flight of families from the congested San Francisco Bay area, however, gave new life to the antigrowth movement in the San Joaquin Valley and foothills of the Sierra. Growth control became the number one issue throughout northern and central California, where “rural heritage initiatives” won widespread support. “People are sick of standing by and watching greenbelts and open space paved over,” commented one antigrowth activist.

Eventually, many Californians concluded that effective growth control could be achieved only by statewide or regional planning. It was apparent that such growth-related problems as urban sprawl, air pollution, and crowded freeways could never be solved by local governments. State leaders began calling for a comprehensive statewide plan for managing population growth. Urban planner Amy Liu observed in 1999 that growth control is “no longer a regional issue but is now a state and national issue; it’s resonating with a lot more people.”

Air Pollution

Air pollution was the most obvious menace to the environment, and Californians led the nation in efforts to combat it. Smog began to produce a sharp decrease in visibility and painful irritations of nose and eyes in Los Angeles in the mid-1940s. The city’s chief of police quipped that “people shouldn’t be able to see the air before they breathe it.” By the 1960s pollution had become so chronic that on bad days the city seemed to vanish. When, as often happened, the air in and over the Los Angeles basin became stagnant and a temperature inversion occurred, the rays of the sun reacted photochemically with various waste products in the air to produce new and still more dangerous pollutants. The result was not merely a blight on the beauty of the region and a cause of sharp discomfort but also a menace to health and a source of costly damage to several crops. The growing of leafy vegetables in the Los Angeles basin virtually ceased.

The San Francisco Bay area, like the Los Angeles basin, had a bowl-like shape, and smog began to be a severe problem in the bay region also. Los Angeles created an air pollution control district in 1947, and the San Francisco Bay counties formed a similar district in 1955. These agencies had some success in persuading or compelling industrial plants to reduce the emission of noxious wastes, often by installing expensive equipment. Yet the smog grew steadily worse. It became apparent that the chief