

How about bailing out the Earth?

By Bob Doppelt

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Opinion: Editorials & Letters: Story

Dear President Bush, President-elect Obama and members of Congress,

You recently committed more than \$8 trillion in federal bailouts, equity buys into banks and investment houses, loan guarantees and other actions to save the economy. I'm a major player in the economy and I too urgently need your help.

I employ more than 3 billion people. My total economic activity in 2007 was \$64 trillion. My size alone should rank me as your top priority for a bailout.

Part of my enterprise includes the food trade. I produce about 2 billion tons of food and feed about 6.4 billion people each year. Just as with the housing market, excessive development and debt are placing a huge strain on my business. If it fails, many people will starve.

I'm also in the natural resource business. I recently provided more than 55 billion metric tons of construction and industrial materials, biomass and metal ore to the world economy. But much of this material is wasted, demand keeps rising and my supplies are running low. If consumption and waste keep growing, global economy activity will suffer.

My long-lived fishing business is in deep trouble. In 2004, this unit produced more than 95 million metric tons of fish with an estimated value of \$84.9 billion. About 25 percent of my fish stocks already are overexploited or depleted and more than half soon may collapse. If nothing changes, my business may be gone by mid-century. This would impair the 2.6 billion people that rely on my fish for at least 20 percent of their daily animal protein intake.

My diversified portfolio also includes the provision of clean air and water. But my patented systems are under assault by the very people that benefit from them.

Vehicles, chemical plants, coal fired power plants, incinerators, heavy industry and other sources are degrading the air I produce. Outdoor and indoor air pollution is responsible for 3 million deaths each year through diseases such as pneumonia, chronic bronchitis and lung cancer. My water enterprise faces similar stresses.

My recycling business is by far the largest in the world. Through years of experience I've developed sophisticated methods of breaking down organic materials, and even some synthetic substances, and reintegrating them into the soil to make nutrients for new plant growth.

Some of my tenants, however, are impairing my assets by carelessly dumping herbicides, pesticides and other toxic substances into the organic matter that my recycling business relies on. I'd hate to lose this business. After all, it supports my food and forestry units and plays a central role in my clean air and water divisions.

My heating and cooling business faces the most serious threat. Over time, I've figured out an ingenious way to keep humans and other organisms healthy by dispersing a carefully calculated blend of carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and other gases in the atmosphere. These gases trap just enough of the solar radiation that is reflected back to space to keep global surface temperatures within a tolerable range.

But some of my tenants irrationally have chosen to destabilize the heating and cooling mechanisms that sustains them by adding even more gases than my systems can sustain. Every one of my enterprises is withering already under the negative effects of excessive greenhouse gases. Many are likely to collapse soon unless those gases are quickly reduced to their original levels.

As you can see, I'm in serious trouble and sinking fast. The collapse of your economy, which is completely dependent on the resources and services I provide, will be trivial if I go down. If you really care about your economy, you will take immediate steps to bail me out.

The \$700 billion you initially committed to bailout the financial sector would be a good preliminary investment. Not only would this money help reverse my decline, it would create hundreds of thousands of jobs and thus support your economic objectives.

Mr. president, Mr. president-elect, and members of Congress, I am the Earth. I'm too important to fail.

Bob Doppelt is director of resource innovations at the University of Oregon and heads the university's Climate Leadership Initiative.