

Is Wal-Mart Really A "Green" Company?

Over the past 40 years, Wal-Mart has contributed significantly to the degradation of the environment. Then, two years ago, McKinsey and Company advised Wal-Mart to do the following:

"Take a proactive stance: shape the external debate by becoming a role model on a significant societal issue."
[August 2004 McKinsey Memo]

Since then, Wal-Mart has taken some commendable steps to clean up its impact on the environment, promising to reduce food product packaging, sell more energy efficient light bulbs, and improve fuel efficiency in its trucking fleet. However, as the following facts show, Wal-Mart's massive size and its voracious need for growth mean that the company's current green efforts are to the health of the planet what cleaning one store is to its global maintenance operations.

Wal-Mart Supercenters Contribute to Sprawl and Pollution

Wal-Mart's Growth Will Offset Its Planned Energy Savings. Wal-Mart's new stores will use more energy than its energy-saving measures will save. Wal-Mart hopes to cut 2.5 million metric tons of CO₂ emissions by 2013, by making its existing stores 20 percent more efficient. New stores built in 2007 alone, however, will consume enough electricity to add approximately one million metric tons of CO₂ to the atmosphere. At that rate, (adding one million metric tons of CO₂ per year because of new stores), by 2013 Wal-Mart will be offsetting its cut of 2.5 million metric tons of CO₂ by adding 28 million metric tons of new emissions within the same time period. [Stacey Mitchell. "Keep your eyes on the size: The impossibility of a green Wal-Mart." www.grist.org, March 28, 2007.]

Wal-Mart Has Over 2,300 Supercenters in the United States. The average Wal-Mart Supercenter is mammoth, averaging 200,000 square feet and occupying 20 to 30 acres of land - about as large as a football stadium. There are over 2,200 Supercenters in the United States, in addition to thousands of standard Wal-Marts, Neighborhood Markets, Sam's Clubs, distribution centers and warehouses. It is the largest commercial entity in the United States, both physically and economically, and its stores require massive amounts of land, energy and labor to function. [<http://www.walmartfacts.com>; San Diego Union-Tribune, 5/21/07]

Wal-Mart Leaves Empty Buildings Behind. It is estimated that Wal-Mart alone has abandoned over 300 of its stores across the country in order to build newer and larger Supercenters, all the while leaving empty concrete shells behind resulting in over 500 million square feet of unused retail space, the approximate amount of industrial space in the entire city of Atlanta. [Erin Zeiss, "Wal-Mart devastates the environment," *Eco-Mind*, UVM Environmental Council, 1/23/07; <http://www.southeastbusiness.com/articles/JUN05/cover2.html>]

Wal-Mart Parking Lots Contribute To Water Pollution. A Wal-Mart Supercenter may cover several acres, but its parking lot can be three times the size of the store itself, placing its footprint at well over 18 acres. A 2005 report by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance estimated at the time that Wal-Mart stores and parking lots covered roughly 75,000 acres (or 117 square miles) in the U.S., equal to the land size of Tampa, Florida, a figure that has continued to rise as Wal-Mart continued to expand over the last two years. Parking lots contribute directly to what is referred to as "non-point source water pollution," the leading cause of water pollution in the United States. [http://www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/reports/big_box.asp; Institute for Local Self-Reliance, 7/21/05; St. Petersburg Times, 3/25/05]



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Wal-Mart Is A Major Factor In The Dramatic Increase In Amount Of Distance Americans Drive To Fill Their Shopping Needs. Wal-Mart has contributed to a jump of more than 40 percent in the amount of vehicle miles American households travel for shopping purposes since 1990. The jump is not attributable to consumers going to the store more often, however, but instead that the average trip is two miles longer. Studies also have found that the size of a store is directly related to the amount of traffic it generates. Larger stores pull customers from a larger geographic area which results in increased traffic – a 200,000 square-foot Supercenter on average generates over 10,000 car trips during a weekday, and even more on a weekend day. [Institute for Local Self Reliance; Stacey Mitchell. “Keep your eyes on the size: The impossibility of a green Wal-Mart.” www.grist.org, 3/28/07; Big Box Toolkit – Impact of Big Box Stores on Traffic - www.newrules.org]

Wal-Mart Supercenters Use An Enormous Amount Of Energy When Compared To Other Retailers. Even with a 15 percent reduction over the current average energy use, a Wal-Mart Supercenter, open 24 hours a day, uses 96.5 MBTU or 96,500 British thermal units of energy per day or nearly three times the average use by a residential home in the United States each year. This is almost double the rate of energy of Wal-Mart’s nearest competitor’s “superstore,” which opens 12-14 hours daily. However, Wal-Mart’s nearest competitors only run a handful of superstores. Wal-Mart’s energy use and carbon footprint, (the company estimates that its U.S. operations were responsible for 15.3 million metric tons of CO2 emissions in 2005), is significantly more than its competitors stores based on its 24-hour operations and push for rapid expansion of the Supercenter format. To put Wal-Mart’s 15.3 million metric tons of CO2 emissions in perspective, this number represents the approximate emissions of Chile and is larger than Rhode Island, Vermont, South Dakota, and Idaho. [Aly Courtemanch and Lani Bensheimer, Conservation Biology, April 29th, 2005; F-E-S Associates, APD Engineering, Northern Ecological Associates, “Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Wal-Mart Supercenter.” Submitted to Town of Potsdam, NY, October 19, 2004; Target Developer Guide Edition 2.7; www.grist.org, 3/28/07; Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center, 5/31/06; www.eredux.com]

Wal-Mart Truck Fleet Adds Major Traffic to the Roads and Pollution to the Air. For example, a Wal-Mart Distribution Center in Merced, CA Is Projected To Have 900 Daily Truck Trips. Using average emissions rates calculated by the EPA, the 900 truck trip estimate works out to around 2.4 extra tons of particulate matter and 83 extra tons of nitrogen oxides entering the atmosphere each year because of Wal-Mart trucks. Since Merced is an area with significant air pollution problems already, residents living closest to this distribution center would be at an increased risk. Wal-Mart currently has 135 distribution centers in 38 states, which translates to approximately 120,000 daily truck trips or equal to the approximate number of vehicles that use the Lincoln Tunnel on any given day in New York City. [<http://www.warnwalmart.org/index.php?id=126>; <http://www.mercedalliance.org>; <http://www.walmartfacts.com>; <http://www.nycroads.com/crossings/lincoln/>]

Wal-Mart Violates Environmental Laws

Environmental Fines Across the Country. In 2004, Wal-Mart faced fines for violations of environmental laws in nine states: California, Colorado, Delaware, Michigan, New Jersey, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas and Utah. [[Associated Press](#), 5/12/04; [New York Times](#), 4/13/05]

Air Pollution Claims in Eleven States. In 2004, Wal-Mart agreed to pay \$400,000 to the government to settle claims that Sam's Club had flouted federal air pollution regulations in eleven states. [[The Business Journal](#), 1/30/04]

Widespread Water Pollution. In 2001, the EPA and Justice Department for the first time fined a company -- Wal-Mart -- for violating newly adopted standards for storm water runoff. Wal-Mart paid \$5.5 million in fines for violations at construction sites in four states: Massachusetts, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. Four years later, however, Wal-Mart signed an agreement with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection over storm water violations occurring over seven years at 20 stores, and agreed to pay \$1,550,000 in penalties. [[Underground Construction](#), 8/1/01; [Forbes](#), 8/15/05]



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Contaminating Water in Georgia. Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) fined Wal-Mart for letting polluted storm water run free into state waters -- resulting in \$170,000 in penalties for pollution at two sites. Wal-Mart failed to take basic steps to help clean storm runoff, such as maintaining silt fencing around construction zones, installing ponds to catch storm water, and failure to keep records. The fines ranked among the highest paid in Georgia for violations of the Clean Water Act. [[Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#), 2/10/05]

Oil Storage Problems in Florida. Florida forced Wal-Mart to pay \$765,000 in fines for operating outside safety restrictions on petroleum storage at its auto service centers. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection flagged the company for failing to register its fuel tanks with the state or install devices that prevent gasoline overflows. According to the state, Wal-Mart also failed to perform monthly safety checks, lacked current technologies to prevent overflows, blocked state inspectors from reviewing records and failed to show proper insurance documentation. [[Associated Press](#), 11/18/04]

Wal-Mart Under Investigation Regarding Hazardous Waste

Wal-Mart Is Under Investigation For Environmental Violations Related To Hazardous Waste. Wal-Mart, Inc., is currently the target of criminal, civil and administrative investigations for environmental violations by the United States Attorney's Office for the Central and Northern District of California (U.S. Department of Justice), Nevada Attorney General, California Attorney General, the Los Angeles County States Attorney and The California Department of Toxic Substances Control. The company is accused of violating the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA, 42 USC §6901), The Clean Water Act (33 USC §1251), and the Hazardous Materials Transportation Act (49 USC §5101). The company is also accused of violating state environmental and transportation laws in California and Nevada. [Wal-Mart 2006 Annual Report, p 44]

What is Wal-Mart's hazardous waste policy? Wal-Mart's official policy is to ship all unsold and returned products to "Return Centers" and sort out the products for disposal there. Wal-Mart has used company vehicles to do this task. [[Las Vegas Review-Journal](#), 12/21/05]

What exactly did Wal-Mart do wrong? Wal-Mart is under investigation for ignoring laws designed to protect the public from the dangers of hazardous materials to human health and the environment, including:

- **California Hazardous Waste Laws.** California state law requires businesses to handle and dispose of hazardous waste in a specific way, including paying fees for disposal and using designated hazardous materials trucks for transport. Wal-Mart may have avoided paying disposal fees, and is being investigated for using its own trucks to transport hazardous waste.
- **Nevada State Law.** Wal-Mart may have violated Nevada law by bringing hazardous waste into the state and disposing of it in a facility permitted to only accept waste that originated inside Nevada.
- **Federal Law.** Federal law prohibits transporting potential hazardous waste across state lines without a permit. Wal-Mart may have violated these statutes by bringing hazardous waste into Nevada from California.
- **Federal Clean Water Act.** Wal-Mart is also accused of violating the Federal Clean Water Act, a law designed to preserve the integrity of lakes, rivers and wild lands. The fact that Wal-Mart has been accused of violating this Act points to questions of more serious environmental infringements.



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