

How Big Box Stores like Wal-Mart Effect the Environment and Communities

"Big Box" stores like Wal-Mart threaten our landscape, our communities and the environment by building on the fringe of town, paving vast areas for stores and parking lots, and undermining the economic health of existing downtown shopping areas. These mega-stores are proliferating at an alarming rate, with the world's largest corporation, Wal-Mart, being the leading example of Big Box developments that contribute to sprawl in our communities.

With annual profits of over \$11 billion, an amount exceeding the gross domestic product of 81 countries. Wal-Mart is on an aggressive drive to open new stores. In 2008, Wal-Mart expects to add more than 300 new stores to the existing approximately 4,000 discount stores, supercenters, neighborhood markets and Sam's Clubs in the United States alone.



Sierra Club has partnered with local community groups, faith groups, and others across the country in events, such as this rally in Florida, to confront Wal-Mart's irresponsible development of wetlands and contribution to sprawl.

Across the country, Sierra Club chapters and groups have opposed construction of Wal-Mart stores for a range of reasons including wetlands destruction, flooding potential and concerns about increased traffic and impacts on locally owned stores. Today, a broad range of organizations, from churches and labor unions to small businesses and environmental groups, are coming together to highlight Wal-Mart's effect on communities and promote positive solutions.



Water Pollution

The sheer size of these giant stores and parking areas cause problems from increased traffic congestion to water pollution. Wal-Mart supercenter stores span several acres, and the parking lots can be three times the size of the stores bringing the total footprint to more than 18 acres. Large parking lots contribute directly to non-point source water pollution, which is the leading cause of water pollution in the U.S. Each acre of impermeable parking surface produces runoff of 25,000 gallons of water during a 1 inch storm. By contrast, a one-acre undeveloped site only has runoff of 2,700 gallons during the same storm. Runoff from impermeable surfaces leads to erosion, flooding, and the flow of pollutants like oil, chemicals, bacteria and heavy metals into waterways.

In addition, Wal-Mart has been the target of various government actions to enforce the Clean Water Act. Since 2001, Wal-Mart has paid settlement costs and civil penalties totaling more than \$8 million resulting from federal Environmental Protection Agency storm water cases. This includes Wal-Mart's payment of \$3.1 million in 2004 to settle Clean Water Act cases in 9 states.

In August 2005 in Connecticut, Wal-Mart agreed to pay \$1.15 million for threatening rivers and streams with chemical pollution. This included \$600,000 in civil penalties for alleged violations of clean-water laws at 22 stores. Connecticut's Attorney General, Richard Blumenthal, noted at the time: "Wal-Mart's environmental record here seems as low as its prices," and announced that the company had "systematic, repeated violations across the state."

Traffic, Sprawl and Blighted Landscapes

In 2007, Wal-Mart reported having over 4,000 U.S. stores, including 276 new supercenters and a total of 618 million square feet of selling space. By 2015, Wal-Mart expects to occupy more than 215 square miles, an area more than 4 times the size of the city of Boston. In addition to the number of stores that exist today, Wal-Mart has blighted our national landscape with hundreds of empty store shells and thousands of acres of unused parking lots across the country.

Wal-Mart and other Big Box retailers typically develop stores at the fringes of towns, which are accessible mainly by driving and often result in increased traffic. The huge service area for a supercenter draws customers from long distances, and places significant stress on regional road and freeway systems. More traffic on the road contributes to air pollution, water contamination, and the demand for more roads and development.

The Big Box model can also force out other stores, threatening the economic vitality of existing downtowns and neighborhood shopping areas. Ten years after Wal-Mart came to Iowa, Professor Ken Stone of Iowa State University estimated 7,326 local businesses closed in the state's small towns and rural areas due to Big Box retailers. Not only does this phenomenon make for less of a traditional, walkable community with local flavor, it contributes to a pattern of development that fuels sprawl and forces more people to drive longer distances.

Retail Forward, a market research firm in Columbus, Ohio has examined the impact of supercenters and found that for every supercenter that opens, two neighborhood supermarkets close. Since many neighborhood shopping centers are anchored by supermarkets, if the supermarket closes, neighboring businesses that rely on foot traffic are also threatened. Communities can be left with vacant shopping centers, creating blight and driving down property values.

Solutions

The Sierra Club believes that because these retailers leave a large footprint on the environment, Wal-Mart and other big box stores should comply with all environmental laws and meet environmental and community standards including:

- Respect the wishes of local communities
- Do not seek or accept public subsidies or zoning waivers
- Fully disclose the environmental impact of stores and products
- Fully disclose all environmental and labor conditions of factories or sub-contractors
- Do not locate stores in wetlands, floodplains or other sensitive areas or in places that would exacerbate traffic, increase air pollution, or contribute to scattered sprawl development
- Provide infrastructure for bicycles, pedestrians and transit-users at all stores
- Reduce energy consumption through green building standards
- Restore or remove empty, abandoned stores within one year of closure

- Reduce storm water pollution by designing parking that does not rely on large lots with impermeable surfaces

We all support livable neighborhoods, good jobs and reasonable shopping choices. Big box stores with huge parking lots like Wal-Mart threaten our communities, our jobs, and our quality of life. There is a better way - demand more from big box retailers, join with community groups to challenge environmentally harmful development, and support local businesses that invest in downtowns.

Partners in the Effort

A broad range of organizations, from faith groups and labor unions to small businesses and environmental groups are joining together to highlight Wal-Mart's impact on communities and promote positive solutions. Learn more:

[Wal-Mart Watch](#)

[Wake-Up Wal-Mart](#)

[Sojourners Magazine](#)

[Always Low Wages](#)

[United Church of Christ](#)

[Rolling Back Justice](#) (pdf)

[Wal-Mart Movie: The High-Cost of Low Prices](#)

[Sierra Club Partnerships Program](#)