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Protecting the final frontier

The Feb. 17 Business article "The moon is suddenly white hot" summarized commercial ventures' planning for exploitation of outer-space resources and compared it to the frontier American West. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said, "Space is the next truly huge frontier."

Unfortunately, just like the frontier where prospectors were unhindered by rules to minimize impacts, there are few treaties, laws or regulations requiring assessment of actions on the moon or Mars. The adverse environmental impacts we have witnessed on Earth would be expected there: Pipelines will leak and pollute, waste will be "lost" into crevasses, dust from blasting will coat solar panels, precious resources will be wasted by inefficient first users, and sustainable best use will fall to pressures for quick profits.

Regulation through law may be impractical. A better alternative would be for involved companies, such as SpaceX and Blue Origin [Blue Origin founder Jeffrey P. Bezos also owns The Post], to self-regulate by establishing industry standards, best practices and protocols to assess potential impacts, minimize extraterrestrial environmental damage and mitigate where needed. Self-regulation would be quick to initiate, practical to companies' needs, effective and responsive to novel environments, and it would boost investor confidence, helping avoid a need for government regulation should the public demand it. Let's not repeat the "frontier" cycle of environmental damage followed by regret.

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