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ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT

Trump's Infrastructure Scam Will Gut Environmental Protections To Benefit Corporate Polluters

By Christy Goldfuss and Alison Cassady | Posted on January 28, 2018, 8:59 am



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President Donald Trump steps off Air Force One upon return to Andrews Air Force in Maryland, January 18, 2018.

In his first State of the Union address, President Donald Trump is expected to announce a long-awaited plan to upgrade the nation's infrastructure and call on the U.S. Congress to work with his administration on related legislation. Leaked versions of the infrastructure proposal, however, show that this is not a plan to put Americans to work rebuilding crumbling infrastructure. Instead, it's a full-scale gutting of environmental protections to benefit corporate polluters and steamroll American communities.

As detailed in the leaked proposal, the Trump administration's plan would require fundamental changes to no fewer than 10 bedrock environmental laws that protect the nation's clean air, clean water, wildlife, and national parks. The plan would hollow out the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the law that requires federal project sponsors to consult with stakeholders who would be affected by new projects and identify ways to reduce their impact on the environment, public health, and cultural resources. The Endangered Species Act is also in the crosshairs, as several provisions would prioritize new development over the protection of wildlife that is on the brink of extinction. The Trump administration proposes significant changes to the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act to make it easier for corporations to break ground and avoid inconvenient air and water quality protections. The proposal even includes some mystifying provisions, such as one to give Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke unilateral authority to site natural gas pipelines in national parks.

The Trump administration will attempt to brand these environmental attacks as an effort to improve the infrastructure permitting process. In actuality, they are attempting to steamroll hardworking Americans by silencing or disregarding communities' voices in determining where pipelines, highways, and other large projects should be built. Example after example shows the foolishness of that approach for the environment and public health. One only needs to look at certain communities that were built 50 years ago—before NEPA and other environmental laws existed—to see the detrimental impacts of this type of decision-making. In a particularly stark example, a low-income community in Orlando, Florida, continues to suffer the consequences of short-sighted transportation policy decisions that left the neighborhood surrounded by highways, isolated from the rest of the city, and trapped in a haze of air pollution.

While the Trump administration is proposing measures to sell out our air, water, and national parks to corporate polluters, it is ignoring tangible steps that it could take without gutting environmental protections. An important first step would be to implement laws already on the books. In 2012 and 2015 respectively, Congress enacted two pieces of legislation—the Moving

Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21) and Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act—that contain provisions aimed at expediting the permitting process that are not fully implemented, such as measures to reduce duplication; track the progress of project delivery; integrate mapping and other data tools with fiscal management systems; and facilitate efforts to align historic preservation regulations. Congress also created the Federal Permitting Improvement Steering Council to manage the permitting process for certain complex projects.

Implementing new laws takes time, and layering new provisions only makes it harder. In March 2017, the Department of Transportation's (DOT) inspector general found that DOT delayed implementing a significant number of MAP-21's reforms because they had to stop midstream and comply with additional provisions mandated in the FAST Act. Rather than understanding and deploying the tools it already has, the Trump administration has jumped to the nuclear option—radical environmental rollbacks that grease the process for corporations at the expense of air and water quality and wildlife.

The best way for the Trump administration to speed up permitting without sacrificing environmental protection is to adequately fund the relevant federal agencies involved in the permitting and environmental review process. Without funding, the federal agencies cannot hire and train staff to complete environmental reviews or invest in technology that provides efficiencies. In DOT's "how-to" guide for environmental reviews, the agency notes that limited budgets and staff resources preclude many regulatory and resource agencies from assigning staff to work on reviews when they may already be strained to process pending workload in a timely manner. Instead of funding these professionals to provide the best information to make informed decisions, the Trump administration has proposed slashing agency budgets and undertaken the greatest assault that has ever been seen in the history of this country on these agencies that protect clean air, clean water, wildlife, and national parks.

With such a public record of promoting the interests of corporate polluters over communities and the environment, no one should be fooled by Trump's infrastructure scam. It is little more than a Trojan horse designed to gut the environmental protections that are necessary for the clean air, clean water, wildlife, and national parks that truly make America great.

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