The Impacts of Climate Change and the Trump Administration’s Anti-Environmental Agenda in Utah

May 8, 2020

Just in the past three years, the Trump administration has attempted to roll back at least 95 environmental rules and regulations to the detriment of the environment and Americans’ public health. Moreover, the administration refuses to act to mitigate the effects of climate change—instead loosening requirements for polluters emitting the greenhouse gases that fuel the climate crisis. This dangerous agenda is affecting the lives of Americans across all 50 states.

Between 2017 and 2019, Utah experienced one wildfire, one drought, and one severe storm. The damages of each event led to losses of at least $1 billion.

Impacts of climate change

Extreme weather

• By 2050, Utah is projected to see a 225 percent increase in its index of the severity of widespread drought.

• By 2050, Utah is expected to see 23 more high wildfire-potential days, tied for the third-highest increase in the nation. 1.3 million Utah residents, or 45 percent of the state’s population, live in areas with an elevated risk of wildfires.

• 136,000 properties in Utah, or 14 percent, are at high wildfire risk. Utah is tied for the sixth-highest percentage of properties at high wildfire risk in the country.

• In 2019, 1,025 wildfires burned 92,380 acres in Utah, ranking the state eighth in the country for the number of acres burned.

Temperature

• The average spring and summer temperatures in Utah increased 1.88 degrees Fahrenheit from 1970 to 2015—tying for the fifth-largest temperature increase among western states. This endangers the lives of the more than 55,000 people in Utah who are especially vulnerable to extreme heat.
Impacts of the Trump administration’s anti-environmental policies

Climate
• In March 2020, the Trump administration announced its final rule to overturn Obama-era fuel efficiency standards for cars. These weakened fuel standards will lead to higher greenhouse gas and particulate matter emissions and will cost Utah residents $225 million annually. This is particularly troubling in areas across the state plagued by the impacts of smog, including the capital of Salt Lake City.

• The Trump administration is attempting to gut climate considerations from major infrastructure projects by eliminating the “cumulative impact” requirement of the National Environmental Policy Act. This is concerning because Utah’s economy relies heavily on its agriculture, tourism, and outdoor recreation industries—all of which are highly dependent on climate and weather conditions.

  • **Agriculture:** According to an analysis of 2014 numbers, the agriculture industry in Utah accounts for more than 15 percent of the state’s total financial output, generating an economic impact of more than $21 billion and employing 80,000 workers.

  • **Tourism:** In 2018, direct visitor spending in Utah generated nearly $10 billion and supported 133,000 Utah jobs.

  • **Outdoor recreation:** The outdoor recreation industry in Utah generates 110,000 direct jobs and more than $12 billion in consumer spending.

Air quality
• Mercury emissions in Utah decreased by nearly 87 percent from 2011 to 2017, yet the Trump administration just undermined limits on the amount of mercury and other toxic emissions that are allowed from power plants.

Water quality
• In 2019, the Trump administration released a series of proposed changes loosening regulations of coal-powered plants and the disposal of coal ash, which can threaten drinking water quality. These deregulations are dangerous for Utah, where coal-powered plants generate 2.3 million tons of coal ash annually. Additionally, one of the state’s sites was ranked the eighth most contaminated coal ash site in the nation.

Oil and gas
• In December 2017, the Trump administration reduced the size of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments in Utah by 85 percent and 46 percent, respectively, removing critical protections for these cultural sites. In February 2020, the U.S. Department of the Interior finalized its permitting plans in Utah, opening up oil, gas, and coal leases on much of Bears Ears’ former land as well as nearly 1 million acres in and around Grand Staircase’s former boundaries.