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

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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, West Virginia experienced three severe storms. The damages of these events led to losses of at least $1 billion.

Impacts of climate change

Extreme weather

• In 2018, West Virginia saw the wettest year on record with 96.99 inches of precipitation.

• In 2019, 593 wildfires burned 7,653 acres in West Virginia.

Temperature

• West Virginia currently averages 2 days per year when heat exceeds dangerous levels, but projections indicate that number will increase more than tenfold to 24 days per year by 2050. This endangers the lives of the more than 60,000 people in West Virginia who are especially vulnerable to extreme heat.

• West Virginia’s mosquito breeding season has increased from an average of 77 days per year between 1980 and 1989 to 108 days per year from 2006 to the present.

• By 2100, summers in West Virginia will be 11.1 degrees Fahrenheit hotter than 2014 temperatures, comparable to those of present-day Cedar Park, Texas.
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 West Virginia residents $162 million annually. A 2018 report indicates that West Virginia has seen minor improvements in air quality, yet the state continues to be plagued by the effects of ozone smog.

• 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 West Virginia’s economy relies heavily on its agriculture, tourism, and outdoor recreation industries—all of which are highly dependent on climate and weather conditions.

  • Agriculture: In 2018, 3.62 million acres of West Virginia farmland generated $560 million worth of crops and livestock.

  • Tourism: In 2017, direct visitor spending in West Virginia generated nearly $4.5 billion and supported 45,000 West Virginian jobs.

  • Outdoor recreation: The outdoor recreation industry in West Virginia generates 91,000 direct jobs and more than $9 billion in consumer spending.

Air quality
• Mercury emissions in West Virginia decreased by nearly 75 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 West Virginia, which is home to the largest coal ash waste site in the country containing more than 960 acres of waste.

Coal
• Coal company executives, particularly Bob Murray of Murray Energy, have requested and advocated for rollbacks of more than 15 different environmental rules and protections. These rollbacks include actions such as withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement, repealing and replacing the Clean Power Plan, and slashing the EPA’s budget and staff numbers.

  • Although West Virginia ranked second among top coal-producing states in 2018, the overall number of coal mines in West Virginia is declining.
• Coal company executives, the Trump administration, and the administration’s allies in Congress have left retired coal miners out to dry by refusing to fully and permanently fund their pensions and provide them with health care options. West Virginia’s Sen. Joe Manchin (D) has tweeted at President Donald Trump daily requesting that he adequately care for retired miners to no avail.

• The continued operation of coal mines during the COVID-19 pandemic presents increased health concerns as infection rates rise in the state, particularly given the threat to coal miners’ lungs and the fact that COVID-19 can present as a respiratory illness.