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Trump Dooms the Future by Gutting the National Environmental Policy Act



Pulp plant, Halsey, Oregon. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.

The National Environmental Policy Act, better known as NEPA, has served the nation well for 50 years. But last Friday the Trump administration decided to gut the law via administrative rules changes that will allow virtually unhindered development, resource extraction and pollution. It's one thing for the Trump cultists to support certain policies,

tariffs, sanctions and war-mongering. It's quite another to allow Trump's anti-environmental administration to doom the future by leaving generations to come a smoldering, polluted and unlivable planet — which is just what gutting NEPA will do.

In a nutshell, NEPA requires the government to consider the environmental effects prior to issuing permits for industries or taking major action by federal agencies. Importantly, the law also requires the analysis of environmental impacts to be presented to the public for review and comment.

As it always does, industry has targeted the law since its inception in an effort to weaken or eliminate the required analysis and/or public review and comment process. In “industry speak” NEPA's prudent measures to ensure impacts are not unduly or irreparably deleterious to our shared environment are dubbed “red tape” and “regulatory hurdles.”

Bending, as usual, to unrelenting industry pressure, Congress has already shamefully exempted any number of projects — such as clearcutting national forests — from the required environmental reviews. These measures are intended, as in the case of national forest “categorical exclusions,” to bolster the timber industry which has largely cut itself out of a future by logging far beyond the sustainable levels of forest replacement. In the parlance of the timber industry, our national forests are not ecosystems in and of their own right, supporting a vast array of wildlife and producing clean water for our citizens, but are “100-year gardens” to be whacked down and “harvested.”

The problem is that industry's rap, as usual, is a total sham and there's no way timber companies are willing to wait a century for the forests to grow back. Moreover, given the increasing impacts of climate change, forest regrowth is not guaranteed. Nope, it's “feed the beast” and under Trump, all the timber, oil and gas, mining and development beasts are very hungry indeed.

Thus, without a shred of concern for the future, the administration is not only planning on wholesale exemption of privately funded projects, but will omit any analysis of climate change impacts or cumulative impacts. Hence, if you suck a river dry through a variety of diversions, the impacts won't be considered cumulatively. And if a pipeline carrying toxic oil sands gunk will contribute vast amounts of greenhouse gases to an already overheated atmosphere, well, no problem — climate change, after all, is still considered a “Chinese hoax” by Trump and his trash-the-planet cultists.

But the consequences of gutting NEPA are not a hoax — they are very real, very dangerous, and very difficult if not impossible to repair. Given that Montana is home to the nation's largest Superfund site, one might expect our congressional delegation might be aware of the problems and costs of dealing with long-lasting environmental destruction.

The public has 60 days to comment on the draconian changes. By all rights our congressional delegation should be howling over the administration's efforts to gut the law. Lawmaking, after all, is a function of Congress, not the executive branch. But so far, the silence from Montana's congressional delegation is deafening — and not just from Trump's blind Republican sycophants. Montana's Democrat Sen. Jon Tester, too, is inexplicably mute on an issue that will negatively affect our state and his constituents while dooming generations yet to come.

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