

Major EPA Changes Under the Trump Administration

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I. Executive Summary

This brief will cover major changes to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the Trump administration, including regulatory rollbacks associated with the “Big Beautiful Bill.” These policies notably prioritize increased fossil fuel production, deregulation, and reduced support for renewable energy. These changes are crucial to understanding environmental quality, public health, and the economy.

II. Overview

A. Causes

A central impetus behind the recent EPA rollbacks was an administrative shift towards market-oriented regulations. In January 2025, President Trump signed an Executive Order titled “Unleashing American Energy,” aiming to promote energy production, primarily fossil fuels. The administration particularly emphasized efforts to “reduce trillions in regulatory cost,” ([EPA.gov](https://www.epa.gov) 2025) portraying environmental regulations as hidden taxes on families and businesses.

Two months later, the EPA announced “plans to roll back 31 key environmental rules on everything from clean air to clean water and climate change,” including a reconsideration of the 2009 Endangerment Finding, a scientific and legal basis for regulating greenhouse gas emissions under the Clean Air Act.

Another specific focus was fuel economy standards. The Trump administration sought to revise the Obama-era regulations under the SAFE Vehicles Rule. Consistent with the rationale of the Executive Order, Trump contended that stricter fuel efficiency standards raised vehicle prices and limited consumer choice.

Industry stakeholders and federal oversight were two important factors in these decisions. Groups representing fossil fuel, automotive, and heavy industry sectors claimed that environmental regulations increased compliance costs and harmed their competitiveness. Furthermore, the administration diminished the EPA’s enforcement capabilities through budget cuts and staff reductions, reflecting a broader intention to reduce the agency’s role in industry oversight.

B. Current Stances

Public and political responses to these regulatory rollbacks are mixed. Opponents, notably public health groups and environmental organizations, assert that weakening environmental regulations could result in increased health risks and a dramatic increase in air quality, emissions, and pollution, which is especially critical to communities already facing climate-related challenges.

Supporters counter that these changes lessen unnecessary regulatory burdens, reduce energy and manufacturing costs, and enhance U.S. competitiveness. The rollback of certain monitoring requirements for oil and gas producers was presented as a means to lower costs for small operators, and the revision of power plant rules was characterized as a way to balance environmental protection with economic flexibility. Many also argue that deregulation can foster innovation by giving industries more freedom to explore new technologies without strict compliance constraints.

These contrasting perspectives reflect a broader divide in US environmental policy between prioritizing public health and industry demands.

C. Relevance

The consequences of weakening environmental regulations during the Trump administration are directly linked to real-world climate disasters, such as the Southern California wildfires in January 2025. Scientists contend that the hot, dry, and windy conditions that fueled those fires were made approximately 35% more likely due to human-induced climate change (Yale Climate Connections 2025). Policies that reduce emissions standards or resist greenhouse gas regulations could increase the frequency or severity of these devastating climate disasters.

At the international level, the stakes are even higher. At the recent COP 30 meeting hosted in November, governments engaged in important policy discussions on climate change agreements and limits on fossil fuel use. The Trump administration's absence in this conference has been criticized as an undermining of U.S. leadership at a time when global cooperation is essential to transition away from fossil fuels.

III. Impact of Communities

A. Stakeholders

A wide range of stakeholders are involved in these EPA changes. The EPA itself is a stakeholder, with internal divisions arising regarding the direction of the agency. In July 2025, the EPA put 139 employees on leave for signing a "declaration of dissent" voicing concerns over changes in the EPA's research and development priorities and the termination of environmental justice initiatives that benefitted vulnerable communities (Cunningham, 2025).

Oil and gas companies are another prominent stakeholder. In March 2025, EPA announced plans to reconsider wastewater regulations for oil and gas industries to "unleash American energy" (US EPA, 2025a). Supporters argue that these changes reduce regulatory burdens and stimulate industries, while critics contend they debilitate accountability for environmentally harmful practices.

Vulnerable communities will also experience significant negative impact from these policies. For instance, the EPA's plans to "terminat[e] Biden's Environmental Justice and DEI arms of the agency (EJ/DEI)" will harm communities already experiencing the effects of climate change and environmental issues disproportionately (US EPA, 2025a; US EPA, 2025b).

Environmental organizations such as the NRDC and Center for Biodiversity are also crucial stakeholders attempting to mitigate the environment impact of these changes. The 2009 Endangerment Finding, which revealed that climate change was a risk to human welfare and health, is set to be reconsidered by the EPA (US EPA, 2025a). This carries the risk of undoing environmental organizations' attempts to alleviate the effects of climate change and educate the public on the issue.

Finally, the general public is critically affected by these decisions. The EPA currently maintains that "it will be more affordable [for Americans] to purchase a car, heat homes, and operate a business... to bring manufacturing into local communities while individuals widely benefit from the tangible economic impacts" (US EPA, 2025a). Whether these economic benefits will outweigh environmental and public health costs remains contested.

B. Youth Impact

Young people in the United States are particularly affected by these regulatory changes as they will see their long-term consequences of environmental change and pollution. In fact, a 2016 report by the Center for Effective Government found that "nearly one in 10 children in the country attends one of the 12,000 schools located within 1 mile of a chemical facility" (Jones, 2025). Furthermore, as children are particularly more vulnerable to pollutants, concerns for youth health are also prevalent (Jones, 2025). In responses to these risks, advocacy groups and policymakers may increasingly pursue regulatory policies and attempts to further research and public outreach about environmental pollution and climate change.

IV. Policy Problem/Tried Policy

Current efforts and policy changes under the Trump Administration include key environment targets such as clean energy, water protection, and clean air.

A. Clean Energy

In June 2019, the EPA issued the final Affordable Clean Energy (ACE) rule replacing the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan (CPP). Its main purpose was to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from power plants by establishing emission guidelines for individual states. Instead of encouraging a broader nationwide reduction of carbon dioxide emissions, the ACE focuses on emission reductions and efficiency improvements for individual power plants. Major regulations on reducing emissions are limited to reducing emissions from major power plants rather than encouraging an industry-wide transition to natural gas or renewable energy.

Therefore, although the Clean Energy Act reduces the emissions of major power plants, it is expected to increase the number of operating coal plants and amount of coal-fire electricity generation. It is estimated that by 2030, there will be an increase in the number of operating coal plants, with 28% of model plants showing higher CO₂ emissions. In general, enforcements and regulations of the Clean Energy Act were less strict than the Clean Power Plan of the previous administration.

B. Water Protection

In 2020, the Trump administration rewrote the Water of the United States (WOTUS) to the Navigable Waters Protection Rule (NWPR) under the Clean Water Act. This new regulation significantly narrowed the scope of water bodies protected by federal law. The final revised definition of the Water of the United States was published on January

2023 and took effect the following March. The new revised act continues the protection of major water bodies, such as oceans, navigable waters, lakes used in commerce and many upstream waters. However, it removes and limits protection for other smaller and more isolated water bodies, neglecting the protection of all water bodies. Examples of excluded water bodies include ephemeral streams from rainfall, ditches, lakes and ponds that did not drain into regulated waters, and wetlands that did not touch regulated waters. This massively reduces the overall scope of the Clean Water Act. There have also been failed attempts to weaken PM_{2.5} standards from 12 to 9 along with attempts to dismiss the Particulate Matter Review Panel, a group of scientists specializing in researching PM_{2.5} health effects.

C. Clean Air

In January 2025, California withdrew requests for Clean Air Act waivers from the EPA that were needed to support vehicle emissions regulations. In 2019, the Trump administration revoked California's waiver for greenhouse gas emissions, acting as a hindrance to California's goal to transition to zero-emission vehicles.

V. Policy Options

A. Restore BIPOC Inclusion in Environmental Law and Decision-Making

During the Trump administration, the EPA significantly weakened its commitment to environmental justice, removing references to equity, reducing community consultation, and disbanding advisory bodies that included BIPOC voices. These actions left marginalized communities even more vulnerable to pollution and environmental harm.

To directly address this damage, Congress should pass legislation mandating that all EPA rulemakings undergo a Racial and Environmental Equity Impact Review, with measurable criteria for assessing disproportionate harm. The EPA must also re-establish and expand its National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC), ensuring that it includes BIPOC legal and

scientific professionals from frontline communities. In addition, a new Environmental Justice Civil Legal Fund should be created to ensure that communities of colour can access legal representation during disputes over permitting, contamination, or infrastructure siting. These measures will ensure that those most affected by pollution are not excluded from shaping the laws intended to protect them.

B. Rebuild Community Environmental Education and Organizing Capacity

Under the Trump administration, federal funding for environmental education, particularly in underserved communities, was sharply reduced, and support for science-based public engagement was deprioritized. This created a knowledge gap and limited the ability of affected residents to identify hazards or respond effectively.

To rebuild public capacity, the EPA should partner with the Department of Education to launch a Community Environmental Education Initiative, directing funds toward schools and nonprofits in areas previously underserved by federal support. These programs must include education on environmental health risks, regulatory rights, and organizing strategies. Furthermore, the federal government should incentivize public colleges to develop Environmental Justice Certificate Programs for local organizers and high school graduates from impacted areas. Investing in BIPOC-led educational programming, especially around pollution tracking, legal action, and data collection, will empower communities to hold agencies and polluters accountable when regulatory systems fail.

C. Reintroduce Federal Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms

One of the most damaging changes under the Trump administration was the suppression of scientific data, the rollback of emissions standards, and the loosening of regulatory enforcement for polluting industries. The EPA weakened protections

under the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act, removed climate change references from official documents, and allowed more discretion for state-level leniency, despite rising environmental health disparities.

To reverse these effects, the EPA must reinstate the Clean Power Plan (CPP) or introduce a stronger federal emissions framework that sets mandatory state-by-state targets, prioritizes renewables, and limits reliance on natural gas as a “bridge fuel.” In addition, Congress must require the EPA to publish annual equity audits, detailing how each regulation has impacted air, water, and public health in BIPOC communities. A centralized Public Environmental Risk Portal should also be developed, making real-time pollution data, enforcement actions, and permit approvals transparent and accessible to the public.

Crucially, new legislation must include anti-backsliding provisions, which prevent future administrations from rolling back protections without rigorous scientific review and Congressional oversight. Regulatory enforcement should be tied to federal funding eligibility; agencies and contractors that fail environmental justice compliance checks should be denied grants or licenses. These reforms will ensure that the EPA is not weaponized for political deregulation in future administrations.

VI. Conclusion

Changes to the EPA by the Trump administration remain a contentious and ongoing matter. After years of shifting priorities and bipartisan debate, the United States continues to struggle with balancing economic interests with environmental protections. From rollbacks to clean air and water standards to the deprioritization of environmental justice, this administration's regulatory rollbacks will have long-lasting consequences for both the environment and communities exposed to pollution. The policy recommendations detailed in this brief focus on upholding environmental justice, increasing environmental education, and restoring federal monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Ultimately, the future will be dependent on the acceptance of climate change as a real issue and targeted efforts to protect communities most vulnerable. The political stakes are high, and so is the need for effective environmental policy.