# Trump launches pollution deregulation offensive

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President Trump signed an executive order Tuesday to begin the process of undoing a set of climate change policies put in place by the Obama administration, initiating a campaign with long-term implications to human health and the environment far exceeding the minor impact of the rule reversals themselves.

Trump approved the order at a ceremony at the Washington, D.C. headquarters of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), flanked by the vice president, the secretaries of the Department of Energy and Department of Interior, and the administrator of EPA. Cloaking deregulation as a defense of jobs and a measure to establish "energy independence," Trump paraded a dozen coal industry employees on stage, promising a return of mining jobs. "We're ending the theft of American prosperity and rebuilding our beloved country," Trump proclaimed.

The order signed Tuesday nullifies several Obama-era climate directives and instructs the EPA to begin the process of undoing the Clean Power Plan. It also reverses a Department of Interior moratorium on coal leases on federal land, and orders reviews of environmental rules covering oil and gas production implemented by the Obama administration.

Tuesday's action builds on previous decisions by the Trump administration to review or repeal environmental rules. An executive order last month directed EPA and the Army Corps of Engineers to rework a 2015 rule that expanded clean water restrictions to wetlands and streams. Two weeks ago EPA and the Department of Transportation announced they were revisiting carbon dioxide standards for cars and light trucks in place for vehicles to be built in 2022 through 2025.

Collectively the rules passed over the last eight years have done little to forestall climate change, nor have they contained the environmental damage from oil and gas production, in particular via hydraulic fracturing, which rapidly expanded with the support of the Obama administration. The Clean Power Plan, which sets state targets for power plant carbon dioxide emissions, requires little more than continuing the transition from coal to natural gas, already well under way. Meanwhile it has proved useful in promoting the political fiction that the Democratic Party can be relied upon to take meaningful action on climate change.

Similarly, rescinding the moratorium on federal coal leasing amounts to little change. "No one's looking for new coal reserves," University of Wyoming economics professor Robert Godby told Bloomberg News. "The decline in coal demand has meant existing reserves will last a lot longer."

Omitted from the executive order was any mention of the Paris climate change agreement. The international agreement requires the 197 signatory countries to submit voluntary pledges to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Obama administration targeted 26 to 28 percent reductions in 2025 compared to 2005 levels. However there are no obligations that legally bind any country, including the United States.

Like its predecessors, the calculus of the Trump administration revolve around the potential relative gain versus economic rivals, in particular China. China's carbon-intensive economy is now the top emitter of greenhouse gases. Secretary of State and former ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson testified during his confirmation hearing that he recommends remaining in the Paris agreement. "We're better served by being at that table than leaving the table," Tillerson remarked.

Nonetheless the Trump administration along with the majority of the Republican party have furiously

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denounced the Obama administration rules as “job killers” and “regulatory overreach.” Behind this exaggerated rhetoric is the real goal of rolling back five decades of environmental regulations that in any way constrain the profits of industry. To this ideological campaign Trump adds a poisonous America First nationalism, seeking to tie the interests of workers with the profits of “their” companies. “We want to make our goods here instead of shipping them in from other countries,” Trump said Tuesday. “All over the world they ship in, ship in, take the Americans’ money away, go home, take our jobs, take our companies. No longer, folks.”

The Obama-era regulations are a convenient political target, but formally repealing them is time-consuming and subject to inevitable legal challenges. Tuesday’s announcement effectively initiates agency review, the first step in a long process of rule re-writing, responding to public comment, justifying the changes and defending them in court.

However in the past two months other components of Trump’s environmental agenda have emerged, including attempts to undermine the scientific basis of environmental protection, and above all, using budget cuts to cripple agencies responsible for implementing and enforcing rules.

EPA administrator Scott Pruitt ignited a firestorm of criticism earlier this month after an appearance on the cable news show *Squawk Box*. “I think that measuring with precision human activity on the climate is something very challenging to do and there’s tremendous disagreement about the degree of impact, so no, I would not agree that it’s a primary contributor to the global warming that we see,” Pruitt said, flatly rejecting the scientific consensus that human activity is the main driver of climate change.

Meanwhile the Trump administration has proposed to cut in half the funding for EPA’s climate research program. Likewise they proposed significant cuts to other agencies researching climate change, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and targeted reductions to NASA earth science programs.

But the most significant proposed cuts come to the top-line levels for the EPA. Trump’s budget outline calls for a 31 percent reduction in overall funding for the agency together with job cuts numbering over 3,000. With staffing levels already near their lowest in 25 years, further cuts are intended to debilitate the agency’s ability not just to write new regulations, but to oversee the regulations already on the books as well. What is proposed is a form of budgetary deregulation, which together with Tuesday’s announcement, threaten public health and environmental protection in order to maximize profit.

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