

Trump's EPA grants email exemptions to California polluters, accelerating environmental destruction

Marc Wells
18 August 2025

The announcement that three industrial facilities in California have been granted exemptions from federal limits on carcinogenic emissions marks another front in the Trump administration's war against science, public health and the working class.

These exemptions—handed out by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) through an “electronic mailbox” that invites industrial corporations to bypass decades-old air pollution controls by simply sending an email—expose the gangsterism of capitalist rule in its most naked form.

In March the Trump administration declared that large stationary sources of air pollution—factories, chemical plants, sterilization facilities—could request waivers from Clean Air Act regulations by claiming that pollution-control technology was unavailable and that their exemption served “national security interests.” In reality, this maneuver created a “polluters’ portal,” an “inbox from hell,” as dubbed by environmental groups, that strips away the pretense of scientific review or public scrutiny.

The three California facilities that have already obtained approval are sterilization plants operated by Sterigenics (2024 net revenue \$698 million), two in Los Angeles and one in San Bernardino County. Each uses ethylene oxide (EtO), a chemical critical for sterilizing medical devices but also a potent carcinogen linked to breast cancer, leukemia, and lymphoma.

EtO is odorless and invisible, and its effects are deadly. Studies by the EPA itself, prior to Trump's dismantling of the agency, found that long-term exposure dramatically increases cancer risk for surrounding communities. That such facilities are concentrated in densely populated working-class neighborhoods in Southern California speaks volumes about which lives are being sacrificed on the altar of profit.

Ethylene oxide is only one among nearly 200 hazardous pollutants now subject to Trump's email exemption scheme. Others include mercury, arsenic, benzene and formaldehyde, chemicals long associated with birth defects, neurological

damage and premature death. Nationwide more than 340 facilities have applied for or received exemptions, including 87 in Texas, 51 in Louisiana and 18 in Pennsylvania. The exemptions are being granted with breathtaking speed and almost no oversight.

The systematic dismantling of every barrier to corporate plunder is underway. What once required years of documentation, justification and review can now be obtained by submitting a request through a digital mailbox. Corporations are under no obligation to inform the public, hold hearings or even disclose the scope of their emissions. Communities already choking under polluted air are thus consigned to further exposure, with no recourse.

Environmental deregulation as class policy

The implications go far beyond ethylene oxide. Trump and his EPA administrator Lee Zeldin have declared war on the very concept of environmental regulation. In March Zeldin boasted of the “most consequential day of deregulation in US history,” targeting 31 major environmental rules for elimination.

Among the rollbacks was an attempt to rescind the 2009 “endangerment finding” that empowered the EPA to regulate greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act. If successful, this would strip the agency of authority over \$1 trillion worth of climate regulations.

To clear the ground for this assault the administration slashed the EPA's workforce by 23 percent, eliminating more than 1,155 scientists who had been studying air pollution, water-borne disease, PFAS “forever chemicals” and climate change.

The Office of Research and Development, the scientific backbone of the EPA, was gutted. In its place stands an

agency staffed by open climate skeptics and industry lobbyists. The scientific analysis underpinning the 2009 endangerment finding is being replaced by a report authored by fossil fuel advocates, giving the administration a pseudo-legal rationale for declaring climate science “unreliable.”

The email exemption initiative is therefore not an isolated policy but part of a systematic dismantling of regulatory structures erected over half a century. Every restriction that impedes the most rapacious extraction of profit is being swept aside.

Workers face death inside and outside the workplace

Nowhere is this more evident than in the industrial city of Vernon, California, a company town 10 minutes south of Downtown Los Angeles notorious for its toxic legacy.

Last month, California Ranch Foods, a Vernon-based food processing plant, pleaded guilty to two misdemeanor counts over the workplace deaths of two employees, paying just over \$6 million in a criminal plea agreement.

Just weeks ago, 19-year-old Brayan Neftali Otoniel Canu Joj, a sanitation worker, was gruesomely killed after being sucked into a meat grinder at Tina’s Burritos. His death was the direct result of unregulated, unsafe conditions.

The same city hosts two of Sterigenics’ sterilization facilities, both granted exemptions to continue emitting a known carcinogen into the surrounding air.

This juxtaposition lays bare the murderous logic of capitalism. Workers are sacrificed on the job, their lives extinguished in preventable tragedies for lack of safety, while the very air they breathe outside the factory gates is poisoned for profit. Regulatory “relief” for corporations means a death sentence for the working class.

Earthjustice has filed a lawsuit arguing that the exemptions violate the Clean Air Act, while the Center for Biological Diversity has sued for disclosure of the facilities’ names. Even if such lawsuits succeed in slowing the process, they will not stop the capitalist state from subordinating human life to profit.

Bipartisan complicity in environmental destruction

Trump’s fascistic contempt for science and human life is extreme, but it is not unique. The bipartisan character of environmental destruction must be underscored. The Obama

and Biden administrations presided over record oil and gas production, expanding drilling on public lands despite promises to halt it.

Biden approved hundreds of new projects, including the Willow Project in Alaska, projected to emit 287 million tons of carbon. Clinton signed the Kyoto Protocol but refused to submit it to the Senate, dooming global efforts to failure.

Every administration, Democrat or Republican, has acted as the faithful instrument of corporate interests. Regulations are gutted when profits demand it, then repackaged as “climate action” when a different set of industries stand to gain. The result has been decades of rising emissions, poisoned communities and the steady approach of climate catastrophe.

The poisoning of communities in Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Houston and Philadelphia is not an aberration but the normal functioning of capitalism. The same system that produces mass layoffs, poverty wages, imperialist wars, and the rise of fascism also destroys the environment. The working class cannot rely on lawsuits, regulatory agencies or the Democratic Party to protect its health and future.

The exemption scheme devised by Trump’s EPA demonstrates that life under capitalism has become intolerable. Workers and their families are forced to breathe carcinogens, drink polluted water and live under the threat of climate catastrophe, all so that a handful of billionaires can accumulate unimaginable wealth. The struggle for clean air is inseparable from the struggle for socialism. It has become, quite literally, a matter of life and death.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact