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Trump Administration Continues to Bulldoze Environmental Regulations

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President Trump holds up his overview of a federal infrastructure review process / Quartz

Amid the global outcry over President Trump's remarks that sought to legitimize white supremacists at a press conference earlier this week, we almost missed the fact that Trump rolled-back Obama administration rules to improve the resilience of federally-financed buildings and infrastructure in flood-prone areas and to update important flood risk management standards. In 2015, President Obama required new infrastructure to be built two feet above the 100 year flood plain and three feet for critical infrastructure like hospitals and evacuation centers, and also updated standards that guide flood insurance rates. Beyond undoing these regulatory actions, President Trump announced a new effort to streamline environmental review processes for new infrastructure projects.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) estimates flooding has caused some \$260 billion in damages from 1980 to 2013. And in the past decade, flood insurance claims now total \$1.6 billion annually, putting further pressure on the [already deeply-indebted flood insurance system](#). As climate change increases both inland flooding and coastal sea level rise, scientists expect flooding to only worsen.

To address increased risks, the Obama administration required federally-financed projects to factor in climate change projections. Now, with a stroke of a pen, the Trump administration has not only put communities at greater risk, but likely reduced the lifespan of infrastructure in flood-prone areas, and their financial efficiency and effectiveness as well.

Former FEMA official Rafael Lemaitre, told [Reuters](#) the Obama-era rules were "the most significant action taken in a generation" to safeguard U.S. infrastructure. "Eliminating this requirement is self-defeating; we can either build smarter now, or put taxpayers on the hook to pay exponentially more when it floods. And it will."

And in New Jersey, which was hard hit by Hurricane Sandy, there was disbelief. John Miller, New Jersey Association of Flood Plain Management, told [NJ Spotlight](#) the Obama-era rule was a "solid idea." He added: "We are going to have worsening conditions. We have to build to future conditions."

According to Reuters, both the American Petroleum Institute and the National Association of Home Builders praised the move to roll-back the flood risk management standards to the earlier version established by President Carter in 1977, arguing that the Obama-era rules on managing flood risk increased housing costs.

The Obama administration stated that the new standards would only raise housing costs by 0.25 to 1.25 percent, but Republican Congressman Ralph Abraham, from Louisiana, who sponsored legislation that would have blocked Obama's flood standard, told [The New York Times](#) the new rules "would have increased the cost of a new home in Louisiana by 25 percent to 30 percent, because most of the state would be put in a federal flood plain." The overall effect, however, may be to increase risk, as communities continue to live and build in flood plains not be characterized as risky, and then fail to qualify for federal assistance when disaster invariably strikes.

In a [new fact sheet on infrastructure](#) that lays of the Trump administration's vision for investing \$200 billion in the 2018 budget, Trump administration officials took aim at what they describe as onerous environmental review processes for infrastructure projects. "The environmental review and permitting process in the United States is fragmented, inefficient, and unpredictable. Existing statutes have important and laudable objectives, but the lack of cohesiveness in their execution make the delivery of infrastructure projects more costly, unpredictable, and time-consuming, all while adding little environmental protection."

At his shocking press conference, Trump said a complex highway project can take up to 17 years (but didn't cite an actual example of this). He called the current approach a "disgrace." His goal is to reduce environmental reviews for a project to two years and centralize management through a "one Federal review" in which one government agency takes the lead on a project.

Trump said: "It's going to be quick. It's going to be a very streamlined process. And by the way, if [a project] doesn't meet environmental safeguards, we're not going to approve it — very simple."

According to [BloombergPolitics](#), the new order "allows the Office of Management and Budget to establish goals for environmental reviews and permitting of infrastructure projects and then track their progress — with automatic elevation to senior agency officials when deadlines are missed or extended. The order calls for tracking the time and costs of conducting environmental reviews and making permitting decisions, and it allows the budget office to consider penalties for agencies that fail to meet established milestones."

Environmental groups were uniformly opposed to the effort to streamline federal environmental reviews, arguing that a two-year time frame may result in more wasteful and risky projects with damaging environmental impacts.

Republicans argue that excessive regulations are holding up infrastructure projects, while Democrats may agree that some regulations could be streamlined, but, really, the primary issue is there isn't enough public investment. [ABC News](#) reports that a Treasury Department report released earlier this year found "a lack of public funding is by far the most common factor hindering completion" of infrastructure projects.

In other federal environmental and climate news: Scientists from 13 federal agencies released a draft of the [National Climate Assessment](#), which Congress mandates be updated every four years. [The New York Times](#) writes: "The study examines every corner of the United States and finds that all of it was touched by climate change. The average annual temperature in the United States will continue to rise, the authors write, making recent record-setting years 'relatively common' in the near future." Perhaps the best that can be hoped for with this administration is the draft review process will be allowed to continue on auto-pilot without political interference.

At the department of interior, [The Nation](#) writes, a purge of climate experts is underway, while the word "climate" is being scrubbed from program titles.

And at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): the agency is now implementing national ambient air quality standards, rules created by the Obama administration in 2015, after [15 states and a number of leading organizations sued](#). Still, there are other worrying developments: Administrator Scott Pruitt's agenda to reduce regulations and cut staff is [largely happening in secret](#). But that may change: the California attorney general [just sued the EPA](#) in attempt to force them to explain how Pruitt will handle conflicts of interest with the fossil fuel industry.

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