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# The Trump Administration and Environmental Policy, One Year in

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## Abstract

President Donald Trump's administration delivered a tumultuous year for the United States in 2025. These changes were most obvious for climate change, where Trump cancelled Joe Biden's policies, withdrew from global organisations and agreements, and destroyed scientific capabilities at federal agencies. The administration eliminated environmental justice efforts across the government and acted under the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act to increase public health risks while favouring business. These are the main changes, but lost expertise and cuts in capacities are not encouraging. The Trump administration is attempting to transform the federal role in environmental protection.

**Keywords** climate change, pollution control, government capabilities, scientific quality

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One year has passed since Donald Trump and his administration took office. This has been a tumultuous year for the United States, one that led to clear damage for US capabilities in science and technology, the

independence of the federal civil service, and trust in government. The Trump administration withdrew from a range of multilateral agreements, abruptly closed global assistance programmes (including the Agency for International Development),

insulted European and Canadian allies, and broadly reduced the federal government's capabilities to deal with multiple issues. At the same time, the administration, using its congressional majorities in the House and Senate, ran up the federal budgetary deficit to unprecedented heights while cutting social safety net programmes.

Amidst all of this tumult, it was difficult to lose sight of the Trump administration's effects on US environmental policy. Roughly one year ago, I presented in this journal my expectations regarding the effects of the Trump administration (Fiorino, 2025). Events of the last year allow me to reflect on those expectations and assess what the impacts of this administration have been.

I expected one year ago that the administration's most significant harm would be to climate policy. This is partly because the US had not adopted clear legislative authority (such as the Clean Air Act or Clean Water Act) and the administration would not face legal constraints. It was also partly due to the hostility of the Trump administration to any form of climate mitigation. This hostility flows from many sources. The demands of the clean energy transition,

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and the required transformations in agriculture and other economic systems, posed an ‘inconvenient truth’ for an administration dedicated to immigration enforcement, tax cuts and expansions of executive power. Beyond this, the Trump administration is one based on right-wing populism, and such populists are suspicious of multilateral problem solving and scientific expertise, both of which are essential for making progress on climate mitigation. The Republican Party has an economic and regional affiliation with the fossil fuel industry, and for the last decade it has been a source of climate denial. For these reasons, the administration has been hostile to mitigating the causes of climate change.

The Trump administration has indeed focused its deregulatory efforts on climate change, because of the lack of legislation and for ideological and political reasons. It has trod slightly more cautiously on other aspects of the Environmental Protection Agency’s responsibilities, in large part due to existing laws that constrain its freedom to operate. But it has taken steps to pull back many Biden initiatives under the Clean Air Act. The United States Supreme Court did much of the heavy lifting for the Trump administration when it comes to removing authority over wetlands, which is favoured by property owners and agricultural interests. In other areas, such as chemicals and hazardous waste regulation, its impact will be felt in the lack of resources and expertise rather than outright policy changes, although some of those will occur. This article focuses on climate, air quality and water quality, with limited discussion of the EPA’s responsibilities for chemical safety, waste regulation and Superfund clean-up.

Looking back over the last year, it is not surprising that climate change was a target. Nor is it surprising that the Trump administration eliminated diversity and inclusion programmes, including environmental justice. The assaults on air pollution policies, given that they affect fossil fuels, were predictable, as was the near-total pullback from international organisations and agreements. What is surprising is the scope of efforts to destroy the scientific and policy capabilities of federal agencies. The damage to

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government capabilities could be even more harmful than the policy effects. Indeed, the administration bragged about EPA cuts that saved \$750 million and reduced staff by 23% (EPA, 2025c). What they did not say was that this reduced the ability of the federal government to track and respond to problems posing threats to public health and the environment.

#### General EPA capabilities and priorities

Information about EPA priorities may be discerned from the agency’s strategic plans. During Trump’s first term, under administrator Scott Pruitt, the EPA strategic plan stressed a reliance on efficiency, implementing laws, and cooperative federalism (which under conservative presidents has always meant letting states do more of what they want). It is what one would expect from a politically conservative administration. Under administrator Michael Regan, the strategic plan stressed science, climate action, environmental justice, and enforcing environmental laws.

The strategic plan for Trump’s second term, under Lee Zeldin, is not expected to be issued until February 2026. However, signs of what it might contain were evident

in February 2025 in an announcement titled ‘Powering the Great American Comeback’ (EPA, 2025b). It consisted of five ‘pillars’: (1) protecting clean air, water and land for all Americans (in line with usual EPA plans); (2) restoring American ‘energy dominance’ by cutting costs and expanding options for fossil fuels; (3) permitting reform, cooperative federalism and cross-agency partnerships; (4) making the US the ‘artificial intelligence capital of the world’; (5) protecting and bringing back auto jobs (making no connection to environmental impacts). Four of the five pillars thus have little to do with the EPA’s historical and legal focus on the environment; and although permitting reform is a bipartisan issue, this administration applies this goal to fossil fuels and not renewable resources.

The administration’s attitude towards climate change, despite the scientific evidence, is captured in a quote from Zeldin: ‘We are driving a dagger straight into the heart of the climate change religion to drive down the cost of living for American families, unleash American energy, bring auto jobs back to the U.S. and more’ (EPA, 2025d). The priority is deregulation and cost savings rather than environmental protection or the health of the American people. Although there is room for innovation in how the federal government approaches environmental protection (Fiorino, 2006), the goal of the administration is to reduce capabilities of the federal government to promote environmental quality, through both policy change and losses in institutional capacities.

#### Policies for climate mitigation

The US lacks national regulatory laws for climate mitigation. Right-wing populism, along with the historical alliance of the Republican Party with the fossil fuel industry, make this an opportunity for the administration to leave its mark (Fiorino, 2022). And they have. Policies of President Joe Biden’s years, embodied in laws like the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, were reversed as far as possible (Storrow, 2025). Scores of grants made under these laws were clawed back. The administration has challenged California’s authority to set more stringent vehicle emissions standards,

established in what later became the Clean Air Act of 1970. President Trump pulled the US out of the Paris Climate Agreement, as in his first term. On top of all of this, the administration proposed to reverse the endangerment finding which concluded that carbon dioxide endangered public health and welfare (EPA, 2025e).

The endangerment finding is an EPA determination that flows out of the Supreme Court's decision in *Massachusetts v EPA* in 2007. A long-standing legal issue had been whether or not the Clean Air Act gave the EPA authority to regulate carbon dioxide. In 2007, the Supreme Court decided that the EPA did have that authority if it determined that carbon dioxide endangered public health and welfare, which is the standard for regulating pollutants in the law. Once President Barack Obama took office in 2009, the EPA proceeded to finding that it did endanger the public's health and welfare and created a regulatory programme for reducing emissions from coal-fired power plants. Known as the Clean Power Plan, this got mixed reactions from the courts and was cancelled when Trump came to office in 2017. Although there was pressure to withdraw the endangerment finding in Trump's first term, it was not acted on.

In his second term, Trump felt no such reservations. In late July 2025, the EPA proposed to rescind the finding. This would undermine the EPA's authority not only to set emission standards for stationary sources like coal plants but also regulate motor vehicles, including by future administrations. Rescinding the endangerment finding is an action that even many business firms find goes too far, given concerns about the increased likelihood of successful litigation if federal action is taken off the table and the prospect of having far more state-level variation (Zraick and Friedman, 2025).

President Trump also reinforced a commitment to fossil fuels. Indeed, his goal appeared to be to increase emissions as much as possible. On his first day in office, 20 January 2025, he issued several executive orders. One pulled the US out of the Paris climate and other global agreements 'that do not reflect our country's values' as the administration sees them (White House, 2025b). Another, titled 'Unleashing

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American energy', contained a number of provisions for encouraging fossil fuels and hampering electric vehicles and energy efficiency (White House, 2025c). Yet a third, on 'Declaring a national energy emergency', discouraged renewables and opened federal lands to more oil and gas exploration (White House, 2025a). Together, these orders give clear priority to fossil fuels, which account for most air pollution and three-quarters of global carbon dioxide emissions.

In January 2026, Trump announced that the US was leaving the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which had stood for 33 years as the global approach to dealing with the issue (Millman, 2026). He also announced that the US would withdraw from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the global body for assessing scientific evidence and policy, and 60 other global organisations or agreements.

These actions, along with withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, will damage international efforts to deal with climate change. The US contributed about 20% of the UNFCCC's core budget. When the US stopped contributing a year ago, Michael Bloomberg filled the funding gap (Sengupta, 2026). The president's authority to revoke a treaty ratified by the Senate is unclear. Nor is it clear legally if the Senate would have to ratify the UNFCCC treaty if a future president decided to rejoin. The

implications for global efforts are uncertain, but when the largest historical emitter of greenhouse gases withdraws from an agreement that authorises the process for reducing those emissions, it will not be good. What does seem to be clear is that the US will miss opportunities to influence future negotiations and participate in global efforts to develop innovative technologies.

The Trump administration has acted to impede the development of renewable energy and rescind energy efficiency standards. Although electricity demand is expected to rise 32% by 2030, about half of which is due to data centres, the administration has cancelled wind and solar projects and made permitting of such energy resources difficult (Groom, 2025). It adopted measures to extend the life of existing coal plants, rescind the energy efficiency standards for vehicles and appliances, and terminate government research on climate science and policy (Frazin, 2025).

### Air and water pollution

The EPA's responsibilities have historically focused on air and water pollution control. Because laws exist for controlling these issues, the administration has had less freedom than it has in climate change. Still, it has taken steps to reverse many pollution control actions of President Biden. One step that exposes communities to higher levels of air toxins are invitations to request exemptions from nine rules that set limits for air toxins like mercury from the synthetic organic chemical and iron and steel industries. The Clean Air Act allows exemptions if an alternative technology is unavailable or it protects national security interests of the US (EPA, 2025d); both are questionable justifications. The administration is also seeking ways to make the National Ambient Air Quality Standards less stringent. Based on scientific evidence, these are a cornerstone of the Clean Air Act (EPA, 2025f).

Other actions are directed at protecting the auto industry, although the actual motivation may be to protect fossil fuels. In addition to proposing to rescind vehicle emission standards as part of the endangerment finding, the Trump administration proposed to roll back fuel efficiency rules proposed under President

Biden (Domonoske, 2025). It is seeking to remove California's authority to issue vehicle standards more stringent than the federal government's, a provision that has been in place since the late 1960s. California and other states are suing the administration (Cal Matters, 2025). As part of this, Trump seeks to revoke the state's ban on sales of internal combustion vehicles by 2035.

On water quality, a cause for political conservatives in recent decades has been to protect property rights and agriculture. This objective was accomplished to a large degree by the Supreme Court in the decision *Sackett v EPA*. This ruling aimed to clarify a long-running dispute about who has authority to regulate the 'waters of the United States'. At issue was the scope of the federal government's authority over waters (often consisting of wetlands) that are wet for part of the year but dry otherwise and not directly connected to a river, stream or other waterbody. The Natural Resources Defense Council, admittedly an advocate for federal authority over wetlands, concludes, based on modelling, that 38–70 million acres of wetlands would be removed from federal authority (Natural Resources Defense Council, 2025). These wetlands, the NRDC argues, filter drinking water, reduce flood and drought risks and protect wildlife. With a Supreme Court opinion in hand, the administration revised regulations not to require federal permits for many wetlands. This meant politically conservative states could set their own policies; it would result in fewer wetlands being protected.

The threats to environmental policy posed by the Trump administration do not end there. It has also proposed regulatory changes under the Endangered Species Act that would give greater weight to economic over scientific considerations, which political conservatives have long sought. According to the *New York Times*, it may be possible to challenge an endangered species listing decision based on lost drilling revenues banned near critical habitat (Joselow and Einhorn, 2025).

This administration has also delayed wind projects, even when they are nearly complete. Again, vague national security concerns were cited as the justification (Associated Press, 2025).

More than half a century ago, the US made a commitment to environmental protection during the 'environmental decade' of the 1970s, with the passage of landmark laws and creation of national legal, scientific and technical capabilities.

#### Chemicals, hazardous waste and site clean-up

The Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976 is one of the few major environmental laws to have been substantially revised in recent years. In 2016, Congress passed the Frank R. Lautenberg Chemical Safety for the 21st Century Act. The administration announced plans to accelerate the pace of reviews for new chemicals and eliminate backlogs. The worry is that, in doing this, the EPA will not dedicate enough attention to health or environment risks. Although the administration has promised to allocate more resources to chemical reviews, it remains to be seen what its approach will be. Yet its dismantling of scientific capabilities across the government is not promising.

For hazardous waste, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act limits what the administration may do, but it could use its discretion and budget decisions to undermine Superfund implementation. For Superfund, the administration has promised to expedite site clean-ups, but this may mean less clean-up given proposed budget cuts of over one half for 2026 (Farzan, 2025). My expectation is that

programmes not affecting the fossil fuel industry will be less threatened, but that the administration could underrate risks and devote too few resources to making its decisions.

#### Concluding thoughts

The Trump administration is attempting a major and enduring transformation in the federal government's role to protect the environment. Protecting fossil fuels is a major motivation, along with the near total emphasis on economics at the expense of environmental goals. With respect to climate change, the hostility to scientific expertise and to multilateral forums are also motivations, as we see in other countries with right-wing populist parties (Dirkx and Wettengel, 2024). There is a determined effort to scale back or even to remove the federal role in environmental protection and other aspects of American life (Gelles and Joselow, 2025). One sees in the justifications for these actions emphasis not only on protecting business and the economy from federal 'overreach' but on consumer freedom of choice. Indeed, justifications for deregulation of motor vehicle emissions and appliance energy efficiency standards often stress a goal of preserving freedom of choice. These policies are part of a broad effort to reduce the federal role in the economy. They reflect a short-term view of issues like climate change and outright hostility to scientific expertise.

In one sense, the Trump administration is taking the long view, at least in terms of the next four years. It is acting quickly, because nearly every action it takes will be challenged in the courts. With a more conservative federal judiciary, especially in the Supreme Court, the administration hopes it will receive favourable decisions that increase its range of discretion under existing laws. The sooner that decisions are made, the more likely it is that judicial decisions can be reached before the end of Trump's term. What is certain, as one environmentalist put it to the *Washington Post*, is that the administration is 'really trying to move fast and break things' (Spring, 2026).

A characteristic of right-wing populism is that it claims to protect 'the people' against the intrusive ideas favoured by

‘elites’. Right-wing populist parties generally are sceptical of climate mitigation. Yet this protection against intrusion undoubtedly will harm vulnerable communities and, at some point, the overall population. Whether this will succeed in the longer

term depends on public access to reliable information on environmental harm and on the vitality of American political processes and institutions. More than half a century ago, the US made a commitment to environmental protection during the

‘environmental decade’ of the 1970s, with the passage of landmark laws and creation of national legal, scientific and technical capabilities. Whether those capabilities endure and in what form will be decided by events in coming decades.

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