

Trump announces sweeping changes to key environmental law

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Workers build an oil pipeline in North Dakota in July 2013; the Trump administration is hoping to dilute environmental regulations for such major infrastructure projects

US President Donald Trump's administration announced Thursday

sweeping changes to an environmental law that would speed up the construction of highways, airports and pipelines.

Under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), signed into law by Richard Nixon in 1970, all major infrastructure projects must be subject to environmental impact assessment by relevant agencies.

NEPA was the US' first major [environmental law](#) and designed "to create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony," and has proved an obstacle to the current administration's efforts to accelerate fossil fuel extraction.

The Environment Protection Agency raised an objection to the Keystone XL pipeline, planned to bring oil from Canada to the US, during a NEPA review under the Obama administration, with the former president canceling the project as a result—only for it to be revived under Trump.

The administration doesn't have the power to change the act of Congress, but, as it has previously done for the Endangered Species Act, it can change rules about how it is applied—and it was these proposed changes that were announced Thursday.

The proposals, which are subject to a 60-day review period for public comments before taking effect at a later date, would raise the threshold for what types of projects require an [environmental impact assessment](#).

It would exclude projects financed in whole or in large part by the [private sector](#), as is the case for a number of oil pipelines.

And [federal agencies](#) will be asked to complete their analyses in four years, compared to the two and a half years they are currently given, said Mary Neumayr, who heads the Council on Environmental Quality.

"Over time, implementation of NEPA has become increasingly complex and time consuming for federal agencies, state, local, and tribal agencies, [project](#) applicants, and average Americans seeking permits or approvals from the federal government," she said.

She added that the assessments for highway projects are currently taking more than seven years, and some studies stretch to longer than a decade.

The administration also wants to remove requirements to examine the "cumulative" impacts of projects, something that would exclude the impact of climate change—even though the proposal does not exclude consideration of greenhouse gas emissions in NEPA analyses, said Neumayr.

The definition of environmental impacts would be reduced to those that are "reasonably foreseeable" and have a "reasonably close causal relationship," while any changes must be "technically and economically feasible."

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