

Trump looks to scale back environmental reviews for projects

July 15 2020, by Kevin Freking



President Donald Trump speaks during a news conference in the Rose Garden of the White House, Tuesday, July 14, 2020, in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

President Donald Trump is expected to announce a new federal rule to

speed up the environmental review process for proposed highways, gas pipelines and other major infrastructure, a move that critics are describing as the dismantling of a 50-year-old environmental protection law.

Trump will travel to Atlanta on Wednesday to announce the federal rule as he seeks to make it easier to meet some of the country's infrastructure needs. When he first announced the effort in January, the administration set a two-year deadline for completing full environmental impact reviews while less comprehensive assessments would have to be completed within one year. The White House said the final rule will promote the rebuilding of America.

Critics call the Republican president's efforts a cynical attempt to limit the public's ability to review, comment on and influence proposed projects under the National Environmental Policy Act, one of the country's bedrock environmental protection laws.

"This may be the single biggest giveaway to polluters in the past 40 years," said Brett Hartl, government affairs director at the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group that works to save endangered species.

Trump has made slashing government regulation a hallmark of his presidency and held it out as a way to boost jobs. But [environmental groups](#) say the regulatory rollbacks threaten public health and make it harder to curb global warming. With Congress and the administration divided over how to boost infrastructure investment, the president is relying on his deregulation push to demonstrate progress.

"The United States can't compete and prosper if a bureaucratic system holds us back from building what we need," Trump said when first announcing the sweeping rollback of National Environmental Policy Act

rules.

Georgia is emerging as a key swing state in the general election. Trump presumptive Democratic nominee. This will be Trump's ninth trip to Georgia and his sixth visit to Atlanta during his presidency.

The president's trip also comes as the state has seen coronavirus cases surge and now has tallied more than 12,000 confirmed cases and more than 3,000 deaths.

Jon Ossoff, a Democrat who is running against incumbent Republican Sen. David Perdue, said Trump's decision to come to Georgia to discuss infrastructure as the state's coronavirus crisis worsens demonstrates that the president is "in denial and out of control."



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Vucci)

"Coming here for a routine photo-op is, frankly, bizarre, surreal against this unprecedented health and [economic crisis](#)," Ossoff said.

Judd Deere, a White House spokesman, said that if Ossoff views a major policy announcement to expedite critical infrastructure projects as anything other than about job growth and economic expansion, then it might explain why he lost an election two years ago.

The White House said the administration's efforts will expedite the expansion of Interstate 75 near Atlanta, an important freight route where traffic can often slow to a crawl. The state will create two interstate lanes designed solely for commercial trucks. The state announced last fall, before the White House unveiled its proposed rule, that it was moving up the deadline for substantially completing the project to 2028.

Thousands of Americans on both sides of the new federal rule wrote to the Council on Environmental Quality to voice their opinions.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce cited a North Carolina bridge in its letter as an example of unreasonable delays, saying the bridge that connected Hatteras Island to Bodie Island took 25 years to complete, but only three years to build. "The failure to secure timely approval for projects and land management decisions is also hampering economic growth," the business group wrote.

The Natural Resources Defense Council said that when Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act 50 years ago, it did so with the understanding that environmental well-being is compatible with economic well-being. The proposed rule, it said, would lead federal

agencies to make decisions with significant environmental impacts without ever considering those impacts in advance.

"At the end of the day, it would lead to poor decision, increased litigation and less transparency," said Sharon Buccino, a senior director at the environmental group.

Trump's trip to Georgia comes one day after Biden announced an infrastructure plan that places a heavy emphasis on improving energy efficiency in buildings and housing as well as promoting conservation efforts in the agriculture industry. In the plan, Biden pledges to spend \$2 trillion over four years to promote his energy proposals.

Trump's push to use regulatory changes to boost infrastructure development also comes as the House and Senate pursue starkly different efforts. The Democratic-controlled House passed a \$1.5 trillion plan that goes beyond roads and bridges and would fund improvements to schools, housing, water and sewer, and broadband. A GOP-controlled Senate panel passed a bill last year setting aside \$287 billion for roads and bridges, but other committees are still working on the measure, including how to pay for it.

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