

Joint Statement: Trump's Suspension of Environmental Laws Cannot Stand

In late March, the federal agency responsible for enforcing the nation's laws that protect public health, control pollution, and protect ecosystems and livelihoods made the unprecedented announcement that it would suspend enforcement of federal environmental regulations during the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Environmental Protection Agency's announcement generated immediate and fervent uproar on social media and in newspapers, and the EPA made a belated attempt to assuage public outrage by issuing an antagonistic press release, accusing the press of "reckless propaganda."

But the truth is, the EPA's action will allow industry to pollute without penalty, even as families and communities do everything in their power to stop the spread of a novel coronavirus. We write today as Alaskan Tribal and environmental leaders to demand that EPA rescind the order altogether and meet its obligations to protect public health. As Alaskans, we must speak out, as our state is on the front lines of climate change, and disproportionately affected by its impacts at twice the rate as the rest of the country. The compounded effects of unmitigated industrial pollution and increased climate impacts would devastate Alaskan communities.

As Americans construct makeshift face masks and shields to help protect themselves and medical workers, the EPA is giving industry a loophole for evading the legislated protections of land, water, and air essential to human health. As people hunker down and do their part to flatten the curve of a disease that is overwhelming the medical system and killing thousands, the EPA has opened the door for industry to pollute by proactively removing regulatory enforcement, with no timeline for reinstatement. The agency's action effectively gives the go-ahead to bad actors.

Industrial pollution has dire and enduring impacts on surrounding communities, and many of these communities are home to people of color or low-income. The types of health impacts these communities face are often respiratory, making COVID-19 a real threat to health and life. Nuiqsut, Alaska, a remote village off the road system and five hours north of Anchorage by air, is surrounded by oil and gas facilities, and that community is hard hit with respiratory illness as a result. The EPA's order gives the operations in and adjacent to these communities free-reign to pollute. The administration's negligence has particular ramifications for Alaska Native Tribes, who have a trust responsibility from the federal government ensuring government-to-government consultation before suspending laws intended to protect communities. The EPA did not consult with Alaska Tribes.

With this order, the Trump Administration continues to abdicate its responsibility to protect public health. On the environmental front, they continue to advance big projects with ramifications for public health and rush environmental review being

conducted under the National Environmental Policy Act. When the public asks for more time to comment on these planned projects, we are ignored and shut down. When the oil and gas industry asks for a free pass from meeting environmental requirements put in place to protect public health, EPA issues the order post-haste. This is especially egregious because as industry gets a pass, citizens continue to bear the burden of participating in the public process, monitoring industrial activity, and protecting their children and families from the effects of pollution.

Like many Americans, Alaskans today are working to re-envision and build the economy that we want for our country, an economy where industry bears the full cost of doing business, and of addressing the negative impacts that those businesses have on our environment and communities. Alaskans and the lands and waters we depend on should not, and frankly cannot, absorb any more of the burden. We call on EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler to rescind his temporary policy, and on Congress — especially Alaska's Congressional delegation — to compel the EPA to enforce these essential environmental laws and suspend all National Environmental Policy Act processes currently underway nationwide, in order to allow citizens to focus on the pandemic at hand.

-Vicki Clark, executive director of Trustees for Alaska; Elisabeth Balster Dabney, executive director of Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Shawna Larson, deputy director of Native Movement; Meredith Trainor, executive director of Southeast Alaska Conservation Council