

Environmental Leadership and Policies Under The Trump Administration

Introduction

The environmental mandates of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Department of the Interior are broad and explicit.

The EPA is charged with protecting the natural environment and human health through:

1. Implementing and enforcing bedrock environmental laws like the Clean Air Act and the National Environmental Policy Act;
2. Pursuing scientific research, investigating and monitoring sources of pollution; and
3. Taking enforcement actions against environmental violators.

Interior, in turn, has the following duties:

1. To serve as the steward of hundreds of millions of acres of public lands;
2. To manage both the extraction of resources and preservation of those lands; and
3. To maintain government-to-government relationships with Tribes.

Both agencies have an enormous responsibility to preserve the United States' natural heritage, with major ramifications for public health. Under industry-captured or otherwise compromised leadership, the agencies can commit or enable substantial environmental damage.

Trump-Era Environmental Leadership

Trump's choices for top environmental posts tended to be either scandalously corrupt profiteers in Trump's own mold who would be forced to resign due to a conspicuous lack of ethics, a la former EPA Administrator [Scott Pruitt](#) (2017-2018) and former Interior Secretary [Ryan Zinke](#) (2017-2019), or less attention-grabbing figures more effective at advancing industry interests, like former EPA Administrator [Andrew Wheeler](#) (2018-2021) and former Interior Secretary [David Bernhardt](#) (2019-2021). Most of Trump's appointees to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) did not have relevant professional experience for their roles, and many had [ties](#) to the oil, gas, and coal industry.

Before Scott Pruitt's short, scandal-plagued tenure as EPA Administrator, he was Oklahoma's Attorney General, where he sued the EPA [fourteen times](#), [worked closely](#) with fossil fuel companies, and reliably [advanced corporate interests](#). As Administrator,

he [denied](#) the reality of climate change and [misspent millions](#) in public funds on 24/7 private security, first-class plane tickets, chartered jets, and renovations, while [misusing EPA staffers](#) to find his wife a job and do his personal errands.

After Pruitt resigned in disgrace, former coal lobbyist and [revolver](#) Andrew Wheeler [took the helm](#) of the EPA and oversaw the majority of the Trump-era environmental rollbacks. Before joining the EPA, Wheeler spent over a decade in the office of climate denialist Senator Inhofe (R-Ok.), then [moved](#) to law firm Faegre Baker Daniels, where he lobbied for fossil fuel clients [including](#) Murray Energy, Energy Fuels Resources, Xcel Energy, and Bear Head LNG Corp. Since leaving the EPA, Wheeler [advises](#) corporate polluters on the federal environmental regulatory landscape at law firm Holland & Hart LLP.

Trump's first Interior Secretary, Ryan Zinke, joined the administration from the House of Representatives representing Montana's at-large congressional district. At Interior he was a staunch anti-conservationist who [made it easier](#) for industry to pollute the air and water as well as to drill in sensitive ecosystems. He resigned amid [over a dozen](#) ongoing ethics investigations, including one [referred](#) to the Justice Department examining a deal Zinke negotiated with fossil fuel company Halliburton to develop land adjacent to an empty plot Zinke owned. The Justice Department [found](#) that he violated ethics obligations but declined to prosecute. A 2022 inspector general report [detailed](#) several instances of Zinke lying to investigators. In 2023, Zinke was reelected to the House of Representatives for Montana's first district.

Zinke's deputy David Bernhardt took over leadership of the Interior Department in January 2019. Bernhardt joined the administration from law and lobbying firm Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, where he [represented](#) polluters including the Independent Petroleum Association of America, Noble Energy, Sempra Energy, Cobalt International Energy, Targa Resources and several others, as well as hunting giant Safari Club International. At Interior, Bernhardt had so many potential conflicts of interest that he [carried around a card](#) listing them all. He was committed to [advancing](#) Trump's pro-industry deregulatory agenda and [assisting](#) his former clients, including [rushing the permitting process](#) for oil and gas drilling in the Arctic. Bernhardt [returned](#) to Brownstein Hyatt upon Biden's election, and in 2024 [filed](#) an amicus brief with the Supreme Court opposing abortion pill access under the banner of government overreach.

The Environmental Protection Agency's Trump-Era Policies

Over four years, the Trump administration rolled back over [100 environmental safeguards](#). One report in the *Lancet* estimated that the rollback of environmental and workplace safety regulations [killed 22,000 people](#) in 2019 alone. After 47 years on the decline, air pollution in heavily industrialized states [increased](#), causing more premature births, premature deaths, and chronic health conditions. Trump's rollback of Obama's Clean Power Plan was estimated to cause an [additional 1,400 premature deaths](#) per year, as well as [sickening](#) tens of thousands.

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump's EPA [granted](#) the American Petroleum Institute's [request](#) to suspend pollution monitoring and enforcement actions, enabling [thousands](#) of unchecked toxic releases across the country. One *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management* [study](#) found that the subsequent increase in air pollution in certain counties was associated with a 53 percent increase in COVID cases, and a 10.6 percent increase in COVID deaths. Even before the pandemic, the Trump administration slow-walked environmental enforcement, [pursuing](#) 70 percent fewer Clean Water Act prosecutions and 50 fewer Clean Air Act prosecutions in Trump's first two years. In 2020, the EPA hit [a historic rock bottom](#) in inspecting and pursuing civil and criminal cases against corporate polluters.

Trump's EPA [withheld information](#) about the harms of over 1,200 hazardous chemicals from the public while [fast-tracking](#) their review and shortening the timeline for public comment on chemical approvals. For example, the agency approved a pesticide (chlorpyrifos) that has been found to [irreversibly damage](#) children's neurological development and [rolled back regulation](#) of perchlorate, which can cause brain damage in babies, in drinking water. Trump's EPA [blocked staffers](#) from warning the Senate about a forever chemical reporting loophole, and [suppressed a report](#) showing that forever chemicals were dangerous at much lower levels than previously known.

The agency also worked hard to make water dirtier and more hazardous to human health. It [slowed the process](#) of replacing lead pipes (lead pipe replacement has since [accelerated](#) under Biden), [removed](#) federal protection for over fifty percent of wetlands and 18 percent of rivers and streams (the Trump-appointed conservatives on the Supreme Court deepened this blow in *Sackett v. United States*), cut clean water infrastructure [funding](#), and [loosened](#) the requirements for monitoring groundwater around coal ash disposal sites (a loophole which Biden [closed](#)). Trump's EPA also weakened controls on treating wastewater from coal-fired power plants, allowing over [1 billion pounds](#) of toxic pollutants to enter waterways relied on by over 2.7 million people. (Biden's EPA [finalized](#) a stronger rule in May 2024 which is anticipated to provide health benefits to over 30 million people who will be less exposed to toxic pollutants via drinking water and eating fish contaminated with arsenic, lead, and thallium.)

The Interior Department's Trump-Era Policies

Trump's Interior Department advanced the interests of extractivist industry on public lands while [refusing to account](#) for how its actions would worsen climate change. The Trump administration [auctioned off](#) over 10 million acres of land and water to oil and gas drilling, including by drastically reducing the size of national monuments like Bears Ears in Utah, a sacred homeland to [five tribal nations](#), in order to open them up to development. (The Biden administration [restored](#) and expanded Bears Ears' protections, but has [continued to allow](#) significant oil and gas drilling on public lands.) Under Zinke, the Interior Department [rescinded](#) an Obama-era moratorium on opening up more

federal lands for coal mining, a decision with lasting impact as Biden's Interior stopped short of restoring the moratorium, and the Ninth Circuit in 2024 [reversed](#) a district court's 2022 restoration of the moratorium.

Trump's Interior also [weakened](#) endangered species protections, many of which the Biden administration has [since restored](#). Such actions included:

- Allowing the oil and gas industry to [kill millions](#) of wild birds by [gutting](#) the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 (damage which the Biden administration [reversed](#) nine months into office);
- Removing Endangered Species Act [protections](#) for gray wolves, allowing states to approve [extensive killing](#) of wolves (the Biden administration subsequently [appealed](#) a judge's restoration of wolf protections); and
- Rescinding [protections](#) for bald eagles and other species widely afflicted with lead poisoning from lead bullets (which the Biden administration has also [compromised](#) on.)

The Trump administration harmed indigenous communities by:

- [Weakening](#) the ability of Tribes to participate in the environmental review process;
- [Revoking](#) the reservation lands of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe (later [reinstated](#) under Biden);
- Pushing forward oil and gas projects like the [Keystone XL Pipeline](#) and [Dakota Access Pipeline](#) staunchly opposed by Tribes;
- [Complicating](#) the process by which Tribes can put land into trust (later eased under Biden); and
- Inviting extractive industry to drill on sacred lands from Alaska's [Arctic National Wildlife Refuge](#) to Utah's [Grand Staircase-Escalante](#).

Trump has said he would like to ["cut" Interior](#) and other environmental agencies if he becomes president in 2024. Trump's former Commerce Secretary Thomas Gilman has additionally [proposed gutting](#) the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which monitors and predicts climatic changes from hurricanes to atmospheric carbon increases, as part of the [conservative plan](#) to destroy the administrative state if Trump is reelected.

Targeting the agencies tasked with environmental protection and advancing climate science and mitigation is just one of hundreds of ways in which a future Trump administration would create an increasingly inequitable, unhealthy, destabilized, and dangerously warming world.

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