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Trump's War on the EPA

Derek R. Larson

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, dlarson@csbsju.edu

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Derek Larson on “Trump’s War on the EPA”

APRIL 12, 2017

Derek Larson

House Republicans recently introduced legislation to eliminate the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Sponsored by freshman Florida Representative Matt Gaetz, House Resolution 816 has one operative line of text: “The Environmental Protection Agency shall terminate on December 31, 2018.”

Normally such a bill might be shrugged off as an act of political theater. Soon after it was introduced Trump transition team member Myron Ebell told The Guardian the president’s campaign pledge to eliminate the EPA was “aspirational” because “You can’t abolish the EPA by waving a magic wand.” But what if he could?

The roots of the EPA go back to the late 1960s when rising public concern over air and water pollution, urban sprawl, and a series of high-profile environmental disasters put pressure on Congress to act. By 1969 a full-blown environmental movement was evident, a complex mixture of suburban residents awakened by Rachel Carson’s 1962 pesticide exposé *Silent Spring*, urban residents choking on smog and disgusted by dirty rivers, and traditional rural

conservationists tired of seeing farms and forests plowed under for development. The war in Vietnam dominated the headlines, but with images of Cleveland's Cuyuhoga River in flames (it was so polluted it caught fire), a pictures of a massive oil spill on the pristine beaches of Santa Barbara, California, and the flurry of photos of the Earth from space sent back by the Apollo astronauts also caught the public's attention. The fragile appearance of the planet from afar, combined with regular news of environmental decline in Americans' backyards, created a powerful sense of urgency around the environment that registered in Gallup polls as a greater concern than racial tensions or crime.

Congress responded to public demands for action with a sweeping piece of legislation, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which was signed into law by Richard Nixon on January 1, 1970. In his comments at the signing ceremony, the President noted that "A great deal more needs to be done [on the environment]. It is a question of whether you put it off or do it now. This is an area where we have to do it now. We may never have a chance later."

NEPA established a new priority for the federal government: "to create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony, and fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations of Americans." As an initial step toward this lofty goal, NEPA established a new Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) in the White House to "to formulate and recommend national policies to promote the improvement of the quality of the environment." One of the first actions the CEQ took was to recommend the creation of a new federal environmental agency, which Nixon did by executive order, establishing the EPA in 1970.

Early in its history the EPA established a project called "Documerica," sending a group of professional photographers around the country to capture images of the American people and landscape in the early 1970s. Much like the famous images of the Great Depression produced by the Farm Service Agency in the 1930s, the Documerica collection offered a warts-and-all portrait of a country striving to move forward despite great challenges—in this case, the challenges of pollution, sprawl, and environmental decline.

These images—and thousands like them—illustrate what the nascent EPA was up against in its early years, and how far we have come from the days when our skies, rivers, lakes, and land were routinely used as dumps for chemical wastes, manufacturing byproducts, and the various effluents of modern living.

Today the Environmental Protection Agency is headquartered in Washington, DC, and operates ten regional offices under a mission that combines regulatory enforcement, environmental research, and public education derived directly from NEPA. Its 15,000+ employees are responsible for enforcing the provisions of the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, regulating the transport of toxic materials, monitoring facilities that generate hazardous waste, and investigating violations of federal environmental laws. Perhaps most prominently they aid state and local agencies in developing and implementing policies intended to bring them into compliance with federal regulations on environmental quality and human health—a direct bridge between Congressional directives to "clean up pollution" and action on the ground.

The drive to eliminate the EPA comes not from the impulse to advance “productive harmony” between humans and nature, as NEPA sought in 1969, but for purely ideological and political reasons. The Congressional sponsors of H.R. 816 all hail from southern states with significant constituencies hostile to regulation of the energy and fossil fuel industries. Donald Trump’s selection of Scott Pruitt to lead the agency stems from similar animus; Pruitt is a long-time opponent of the EPA who in his former capacity as Oklahoma’s Attorney General sued the agency thirteen times to prevent it from enforcing regulations on air quality, drinking water safety, and clean energy. Ultimately, while Trump may not have a magic wand with which to wave the EPA in oblivion, his administrative appointments and proposal to slash the agency’s budget by over 30% would render it ineffective at its most basic task: keeping our air, water, and land safe for human life.

The impact of these proposed cuts would be felt most dramatically in programs aimed at studying, preparing for, and adapting to climate change. The new administration began slowing down or shuttering climate-related work at EPA and other agencies even before transmitting a budget outline to Congress. In January, Trump administration officials instructed the EPA to remove all information related to climate change from its web site, triggering fear among scientists that critical data might be lost. In March, employees of the Department of Energy were told the words “climate change” could no longer be used in official written communication. Less than two weeks ago the President signed an executive order striking down many of the Obama-era programs intended to prepare the nation for the now-inevitable impacts of climate change and dismantling the EPA’s Clean Power Plan, the cornerstone of our commitment to international climate agreements.

All of this has happened before the EPA’s budget is cut and the reality of having a climate-change-denier in charge of the nation’s primary environmental agency fully sinks in.

Almost a half-century ago the public demanded Congress act to ensure access to clean air, clean water, and healthy environments for all Americans. Legislators responded with a forward-looking law that promised to “Fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations... and assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings.” In the decades since, the Environmental Protection Agency has held primary responsibility for that work. That we can breathe freely in our major cities, safely drink our tap water, and even see wildlife like bald eagles and timber wolves without traveling to Alaska all point to a record of relative success—we no longer live in the dirty, stinking, unhealthy world the EPA’s Documerica photographers illustrated in the mid-1970s. But without a functional EPA going forward we may well once again, and likely won’t need another half-century to get there.