

Trump EPA to Shred Rules on Toxic Pollution

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Featured image: Houston, Texas pollution [Photo: Michelle Rivera]

At the direction of the Trump administration, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is radically revising its method for determining health and safety risks associated with toxic chemicals, considering only the impact of exposure in the workplace and direct consumption of the toxins, but not the longer-term impact of the diffusion of such substances into the air, water and land.

A report in the Friday edition of the *New York Times* characterized the decision as “a big victory for the chemical industry,” which effectively guts enforcement of a law passed in 2016 requiring the EPA to evaluate hundreds of chemicals, many of them in common use, and determine if they should face new restrictions or be withdrawn from the market.

According to the *Times*,

“as it moves forward reviewing the first batch of 10 chemicals, the EPA has in most cases decided to exclude from its calculations any potential exposure caused by the substances’ presence in the air, the ground or water, according to more than 1,500 pages of documents released last week by the agency.”

The agency will consider possible harm caused by workplace exposure—i.e., in the manufacturing of a chemical—and by direct consumption where the chemical is normally used, as with perchloroethylene, a suspected carcinogen widely used in dry-cleaning. But the accumulating runoff of perchloroethylene into rivers and streams, into the air, or into landfills will not be studied, even though 44 states have found the chemical in drinking water.

Two of the senior officials involved in this decision-making come directly from the chemical manufacturing industry. Nancy B. Beck, who oversees the toxic chemical unit of the EPA, was previously an executive at the American Chemistry Council (ACC), an industry lobby. Another official involved is Erik Baptist, a former lawyer for the American Petroleum Institute, which lobbies for the oil and gas companies, many of which have chemical subsidiaries.

According to the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF),

“the Trump administration is systematically weakening the EPA and seeking to dismantle key new authorities and mandates Congress just gave it under the reformed Toxic Substances Control Act.”

The actions taken by EPA include an indefinite delay on bans of high-risk uses of three dangerous chemicals: methylene chloride, N-methylpyrrolidone and trichloroethylene.

The EDF warned of the capture of the EPA by cronies of the polluting industries, giving Nancy Beck as a prime example of “a senior official at the American Chemistry Council—the chemical industry’s primary lobbying arm. In her new job, she is shaping policy on hazardous chemicals, making decisions that directly affect the financial interests of ACC member companies.”

In some cases, Beck has introduced language written by the ACC directly into EPA mandates, the environmental group charged.

Just in its risk analysis for the first 10 chemicals assessed under the Toxic Substances Control Act, the EPA will discount the effect of an estimated 68 million pounds a year of emissions, according to an EDF analysis.

The *Times* added, based on its review of hundreds of EPA documents, that other changes in the interests of polluters “narrow the definitions of certain chemicals, including asbestos.” The newspaper continued:

“Some asbestos-like fibers will not be included in the risk assessments, one agency staff member said, nor will the 8.8 million pounds a year of asbestos deposited in hazardous landfills or the 13.1 million pounds discarded in routine dump sites.”

All told, more than 70 lawsuits have been filed against EPA regulatory actions, nearly all of them challenging agency actions that were aligned with corporate interests and aimed at increasing the risk to the general population from toxic substances being released into the air and water or dumped into ordinary landfills rather than specially prepared sites.

Also Thursday, the EPA issued an advanced notice of proposed rule-making indicating that it was going to largely scrap any consideration of social costs and social benefits in the formulation of anti-pollution regulations, limiting rules instead to the immediate cost and benefit for the corporations involved.

A few days earlier, on June 1, EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt announced that the agency would no longer evaluate asbestos in homes and businesses as a health risk, even though the death toll from asbestos exposure is estimated at 12,000 to 15,000 people a year in the United States alone.

The EPA has also sought to suppress a study by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that suggested much lower levels of perfluorooctanesulfonic acid and perfluorooctane acid (PFOS and PFOA) for human health and safety than suggested by the EPA. These chemicals are in widely used substances like Teflon.

A coalition of more than 50 public interest groups issued an appeal June 7 for the immediate release of the suppressed HHS study on perfluorinated chemicals in drinking water. In a letter to HHS, the groups wrote that the family of bioaccumulative and persistent chemicals known as PFAS “are potent toxicants linked to cancer, liver and thyroid damage, developmental impacts, and numerous other adverse health effects, including harming our immune systems.” The letter added,

“The government should be sharing information about these dangers, not hiding it.”

Congressional Democrats have made repeated attacks on EPA administrator Pruitt, but these have largely revolved around his evident personal corruption, including accepting gifts from industry lobbyists and other petty transgressions. There has been little effort to highlight the colossal impact on public health of the “get out of jail free” card issued by the Trump EPA to every major corporate polluter.

The Democrats, like the Republicans, do the bidding of corporate America when it comes to any serious threat to their profit interests. While they posture as more environmentally conscious, this has as much substance as their pretense to be pro-worker, while the death toll of workers killed and injured on the job mounted throughout the Obama administration.

And it was under Democrats as well as Republicans that such atrocities as the poisoning of the water supply of Flint, Michigan and other cities took place, all in the service of boosting corporate profits through privatization and the selloff of public assets.

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