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Trump repeals U.S. government's power to regulate climate

“This rule doesn’t change the reality of climate change — it just denies it,” said one former EPA adviser under President Joe Biden.

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Nearly 17 years after the Environmental Protection Agency declared that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases threaten the public’s health and welfare, the agency on Thursday rescinded the landmark legal opinion underpinning a wave of federal policies aimed at climate change.

The agency issued its “endangerment finding” in 2009, concluding that the government had a sound legal basis to regulate greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act. In scrapping the policy this week, the EPA will seek to erase limits on emissions from cars, power plants and other industries that release the vast majority of the nation’s planet-warming pollution.

At an event at the White House on Thursday afternoon alongside EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin, President Donald Trump called the decision “the single largest deregulatory action in American history.” He added, “And I think we can add the words, ‘by far.’”

The announcement represents more than just the latest in a litany of rollbacks of climate and environmental safeguards by Trump, who has referred to climate change as “a hoax” and a “scam.” Rather, it marks the culmination of years of effort by conservative and industry groups to undermine the cornerstone of federal

rules that limit greenhouse gases — and to hamper future administrations from putting them back in place after Trump.

For years, wiping out the endangerment finding was a holy grail for those who had opposed the many climate-focused regulations it had made possible. But again and again, efforts to challenge it failed.

In January 2021, at the end of Trump’s first term, even his own EPA denied several petitions that had questioned the scientific basis of the policy and sought to reverse or repeal it. The agency later asserted that the science supporting the endangerment finding was “robust, voluminous, and compelling.”

As recently as late 2023, the Supreme Court declined to hear a case from two groups challenging the endangerment finding, after the litigation also had been dismissed in a lower federal court, which called the plaintiffs’ arguments “flawed” and “without merit.”

But officials wasted little time during Trump’s second term in taking aim at the legal notion that the federal government has an obligation to regulate carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gases — pollutants that scientists have demonstrated are fueling the warming of the atmosphere, hastening sea-level rise and making hurricanes, wildfires and other disasters more intense and common.

“This is a big deal,” Zeldin said on Thursday, saying the move would end an era of “heavy-handed climate policies” under the Obama and Biden presidencies. He argued those administrations had used the endangerment finding to “steamroll into existence a left-wing wish list of costly climate policies, electric vehicle mandates, and other requirements that assaulted consumer choice and affordability.”

Zeldin has said instead that he aims to balance economic growth with environmental protection. Conservatives and industry groups have praised the move, particularly the elimination of restrictions on motor vehicle emissions, saying it will allow automakers to produce cars that consumers want to buy rather than dictating that Americans purchase an increasing number of electric vehicles.

Jeff Holmstead, a partner at the law and lobbying firm Bracewell who served as head of the EPA’s air office under President George W. Bush, said that for now, the

only immediate legal impact will be the elimination of greenhouse gas standards on the nation's cars and trucks, which Trump and Zeldin also touted on Thursday.

But, he added, "If the legal reasoning that they proposed to rely on for revoking the endangerment finding is upheld in court, no future EPA will be able to regulate CO2 emissions."

Environmental groups, including organizations such as the American Lung Association and the American Public Health Association, vowed that the judicial system is exactly where the latest Trump action will soon head.

"There is no way to reconcile EPA's decision with the law, the science, and the reality of disasters that are hitting us harder every year," Abbie Dillen, the president of the legal group Earthjustice, said in a statement. "This is a slap in the face for all of the millions of Americans who are experiencing the devastating costs of extreme heat, wildfires, flooding, and storms. Earthjustice and our partners will see the Trump administration in court."

Environmentalists and scientists note that the dangers posed by the burning of fossil fuels and the emissions that produces are clear, as rising temperatures lead to more heat-related deaths, more mosquito-borne illnesses and more economic damages from extreme weather. In addition, traditional air pollution from such sources has its own documented toll in the form of premature deaths and other financial costs.

"The EPA is killing the biggest single step any nation has taken to save oil, save consumers money at the pump and combat global warming," said Dan Becker, director of the Center for Biological Diversity's Safe Climate Transport Campaign.

He added that the gutting of tailpipe standards in particular, which are the largest source of U.S. planet-warming emissions, will mean that "American families will suffer long-term harms so that giant auto and oil companies can pocket short-term profits." It also will leave the United States woefully behind in the global transition toward electric vehicles, Becker said.

Climate-driven weather disasters caused \$115 billion of damage in 2025 alone, according to an estimate by the research group Climate Central, which took over a

disaster monitoring database previously administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

“This rule doesn’t change the reality of climate change — it just denies it,” said Zealan Hoover, a former senior adviser to the EPA administrator under President Joe Biden. “The Trump administration is turning its back on every credible scientific warning that climate pollution endangers American lives and livelihoods.”

The EPA issued its endangerment finding after the Supreme Court ruled in a 2007 case known as *Massachusetts v. EPA* that the agency had the authority to regulate carbon dioxide, methane and other climate pollutants under the Clean Air Act.

But the conservative shift on the Supreme Court since then could bolster the administration’s chances of a favorable ruling if the issue comes before it again. In 2022, for instance, the court struck down Obama-era regulations of power-plant emissions.

When the EPA proposed repealing the endangerment finding last year, the agency cited a report produced by the Energy Department questioning the global scientific consensus on climate change. Scientists said that report was riddled with errors and misleading information, while environmental groups successfully sued, with a U.S. district court ruling that the secretive way in which the Energy Department assembled climate skeptics to write the report violated federal law.

White House officials had delayed finalizing the endangerment repeal over fears that the science and economic analysis used to justify the change were not strong enough to hold up in court, people familiar with the discussions told *The Washington Post* in January before the ruling.

Zeldin and allied conservatives have largely avoided engaging with the science behind the opinion, focusing instead on narrower legal and economic arguments, including that Congress intended the Clean Air Act to regulate toxic air pollution and did not envision regulating greenhouse gases.

“When Congress wants the executive branch to regulate greenhouse gases, it should pass clear legislation to do just that,” said Tom Pyle, president of American Energy Alliance, a conservative advocacy group. “Until then, rescinding this

finding simply follows the law and frees American families from sweeping regulations that have raised energy costs without measurable benefit.”

Adam Smith, a senior climate impacts scientist at Climate Central, said it’s clear that investing in policies to prevent and adapt to climate change saves money in the long run. “We cannot overlook the impact from human-caused climate change increasing the intensity and frequency of some types of extreme events,” he said.

Rising average temperatures and shifting weather driven by climate change already have resulted in Americans losing 12 percent of their net income, said Derek Lemoine, an economics professor at the University of Arizona.

“The current administration is treating the benefits of these regulations as essentially zero,” Lemoine said, “and all the evidence suggests the benefits are not zero.”

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2026/02/12/endangerment-finding-repeal/>