

Trump's attack on the environment comes to Denver Tuesday

Denver Post

By **EAN THOMAS TAFOYA** | Guest Commentary

February 8, 2020 at 9:00 am

In another attempt to undermine the environment, attack communities of color, and threaten public health, the Trump administration is trying to weaken the country's bedrock environmental law, the National Environmental Policy Act. This attack will make it easier for polluters to bypass public health safeguards that ensure that our lands, air and water are safe.

The act is often the only law ensuring that the communities who stand to be harmed most by an infrastructure project are protected and heard. The act ensures that major projects like the construction of a pipeline, highway, or another disruptive project, evaluate the public health risks that such a development would inflict upon a communities' natural resources, air quality, and overall health. Before proceeding with a project that could pose a significant environmental impact, the act requires the government and "project sponsors," who often come from polluting industries, do their due diligence to avoid harm.

It's simple: this environmental law forces the government to listen to citizens and look before it leaps. Soon, however, the Trump administration will hold a hearing in Denver — one of just two nationwide — to hear from the public about its proposal to gut the law.

I'd tell you to attend the hearing, but spaces, which were limited to just 100 and required advance online registration, filled up in minutes. Why the rushed, secretive process? It might just be that the Trump administration doesn't want you to know the details of what it's doing.

Remember when I told you that "project sponsors" under the Act often include polluting industries like oil and gas wishing to build pipelines? Under the Trump administration's proposal, these "sponsors" could write their own environmental impact reviews, or hire contractors who won't have to disclose financial conflicts-of-interest to do so. That's right, the same

folks building the pipeline could be empowered, in law, to tell you that the pipeline is safe.

The act doesn't just protect us from bad actors in industries, either. It requires the federal government to assess the potential consequences of its actions before embarking on incredibly harmful projects that could devastate the ecosystems and health of surrounding communities, including communities of color. That's not just good for our environment; it ensures that taxpayer dollars won't be wasted on cleanups down the road.

If you want to know what this law means to Coloradans, look no further than the Bureau of Land Management's plan to greenlight thousands of new oil and gas wells atop the Roan Plateau in 2007. There is little doubt that these wells would have destroyed one of the crown jewels of Colorado public lands, as well as worsening the air that communities breathe.

The National Environmental Policy Act gave Coloradans one of their only tools forcing the government to consider safer alternatives, and consider the effects of massive new oil and gas development on air quality. If President Trump gets his way, industry and government may be able to sweep the damage they will cause under the rug.

We also know who would bear the brunt of much of the air, water, and other pollution allowed by the Trump proposal: the communities of color in Denver, a city the American Lung Association recently ranked among the most polluted cities in the nation. It's these communities, where the incidence of asthma, lung disease, and cancer tends to be the highest, that so often go overlooked when the government and polluters are working hand-in-hand.

The Trump administration's push to tip the environmental review process in industry's favor is incredibly dangerous and reckless. Even though many working Coloradans can't make the Trump administration's sham mid-week hearing for its abhorrent proposal, we will use every tool we have to tell the government to withdraw this terrible proposal and to stop disregarding the health of frontline communities.

Ean Tafoya is a community activist in Denver who serves on the Colorado Latino Forum, the Denver Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation, Historic Denver, and numerous other service organizations.