

COMMENTARY: Trump's deregulatory agenda puts Delaware River in crosshairs

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Like so many children in the greater Philadelphia area, the creek was my playground. For me, it was Ithan Creek, but for others, it was the many rivers, streams, and tributaries from the Delaware to the Brandywine.

As I grew older, however, I watched the nature around me deteriorate and disappear. The lush forests and cascading creeks were helpless against the bulldozers, polluted runoff and invasive species. Now when I visit my childhood stomping grounds, I see my beloved Ithan Creek overwhelmed with this damage; a highway congested with cars and trucks, sprawling development bringing destructive pollution, and damage to our air, water, wetlands and wildlife. And increasingly in the region, communities are facing the destructive force of new pipelines — taking public parks and private property in order to cut through creeks and communities in service to the fracking industry.

If the Trump administration gets its way, we'll see many more cases like Ithan Creek multiplying all over the country. A little-known but essential environmental law could soon be ripped to shreds, depriving the public of its right to ask questions or voice concerns about development, dredging, dams or pipeline projects.

The goal of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is to protect communities from irresponsible government action. It ensures people have the right to be heard before government agencies approve projects that will directly impact their lives.

Take the Delaware River as an example. The Delaware is the last major free flowing river in the east, it provides drinking water to more than 17 million people, and contributes over \$22 billion in annual economic value to the region. Proposals to dam, develop or otherwise harm the river are uncomfortably commonplace. Imagine if communities along the river were denied a voice in how or if such projects should advance. Sound unreasonable? A new proposal from the Trump administration could make this hypothetical scenario a reality.

Pipelines are another good example of the importance of NEPA. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) is tasked with approving interstate fracked gas pipeline projects. When FERC approves a pipeline project, it gives companies the power to take private property rights and public lands in order to build their pipelines. Pipelines decimate forests, cut streams, result in dangerous climate changing emissions, and bring the ever present threat of pipeline accidents and explosions to people's homes and the yards where their children play.

How does NEPA play into FERC? NEPA is the law that gives local communities — and community members like you — a say in the decision-making process before a FERC approved pipeline can be built. Sadly, FERC is very biased towards the industry — but things would be even worse if the public was robbed by the Trump Administration of their right to have a say during the process.

The Trump administration is taking steps to repeal NEPA — effectively putting a gag order on local communities.

Whatever community you live in, NEPA provides irreplaceable value. City neighborhoods face threats from dirty incinerators. Expanding highways bring increased sprawl and congestion. Oil and gas development bring dangerous pollution to schools, playgrounds, and streams. Without NEPA, your right to speak in defense of your community could be largely taken away.

NEPA doesn't prevent good projects from advancing — it makes sure we have a chance to stop the bad ones.

As someone who has been fighting for the environment since I was a child, and serving as the Delaware Riverkeeper for nearly 25 years, I know that NEPA must be saved for us to be safe. Rolling back NEPA is bad for our health, our environment and especially terrible for disadvantaged communities. In fact, taking our rights to participate in the public decision-making process is not only irresponsible, it's un-American.

The government should be empowering communities by giving them a voice in the decisions that impact their lives, not trying to silence the public while further empowering the industry. But since the Trump Administration seems keen to do the contrary, we must take action. If we don't, our children and grandchildren will suffer the consequences.

Please join me and speak up in defense of NEPA.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Maya van Rossum is a lawyer, author and chief advocate of the Delaware River watershed for the past 25 years.

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