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Trump Administration Aims to Roll Back Bedrock Climate Tool

Plan to rescind ‘endangerment finding’ would upend efforts to curb emissions

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The stacks of a coal-fired power plant rise over Maysville, Ky. PHOTO: JEFF SWENSEN/GETTY IMAGES

WASHINGTON—The Trump administration is taking a big swing at toppling a landmark scientific finding on greenhouse-gas emissions that the government has used to regulate emissions from power plants, aircraft, cars and more.

The Environmental Protection Agency said Tuesday that it was seeking to rescind what’s known as the government’s endangerment finding. The 2009 declaration states that greenhouse gases threaten public health and welfare by raising global temperatures, increasing the likelihood of heat waves, more intense hurricanes and storms with heavy rainfall.

The EPA said the endangerment finding has been used to justify \$1 trillion in regulations, though it didn’t provide details behind the figure. By rescinding the finding, the agency would “end 16

years of uncertainty for automakers and American consumers,” EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin said.

In a 302-page proposal to rescind the declaration, the administration argues that the original 2009 finding was “unduly pessimistic” regarding increases in greenhouse gas emissions and U.S. temperatures, which it said peaked in the 1930s and have remained relatively stable since then.

Data collected by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration—and the EPA itself—contradict that claim, finding that average global atmospheric temperatures are at their highest level since record-keeping began in the 1850s. Despite mounting public attention to extreme weather, such events haven’t increased relative to historic highs, the EPA proposal states.

Concentrations of greenhouse gases—such as carbon dioxide and methane that trap the sun’s energy and warm the atmosphere—are at their highest level in 800,000 years, according to the EPA’s website, which notes the temperature records contained in ice cores, tree rings and other proxy records of the past atmosphere.



President Trump PHOTO: HU YOUSONG/ZUMA PRESS

The new proposal states that there may actually be benefits to warmer temperatures and higher CO₂ levels that haven’t been considered by previous EPA officials, such as higher crop yields and longer growing seasons.

“CO₂ is necessary for human, animal and plant life, and advances public health,” the proposal states.

Higher CO₂ levels and hotter temperatures also can lead to heat stress for plants, increased risk of droughts and more pests and diseases, according to the 2023 National Climate Assessment, a congressionally mandated document produced by scientists at 14 federal agencies.

The EPA has used the endangerment finding to regulate emissions from power plants, aircraft, motor vehicles, landfills and oil and gas producers. That has forced automakers to adopt technologies that curb emissions and has spurred the advance of electric vehicles and lithium-ion batteries.

As part of the proposal, the administration is seeking to rescind rules limiting CO₂ emissions from vehicles, dealing a blow to efforts to promote the adoption of electric vehicles and reduce

emissions from fuel-burning cars, trucks and buses.

The endangerment finding is based on decades of scientific evidence that greenhouse-gas emissions are warming the planet. Critics say the declaration's claim that CO₂ emissions are a pollutant is misguided and that such a major policy should only be implemented by an act of Congress. They also say the government over the years has made it more expensive to build and maintain fossil-fuel power plants, straining the grid as energy [demand is on the rise](#).



Some U.S. automakers said the Biden administration's goals to cut vehicle emissions were too ambitious. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

"The real cost is the absence of new natural gas and coal plants that could be meeting the growing demand for electricity right now," said Travis Fisher, who served in the first Trump administration and is now the director of energy and environmental policy studies at the Cato Institute, the libertarian think tank.

The EPA, traditionally one of the strongest advocates for the economic benefits of curbing emissions, last year estimated that the U.S. would see a net benefit of \$20 billion a year from new pollution standards for fossil-fuel-fired power plants.

Rescinding the endangerment finding could set off a scramble among companies that have spent billions of dollars to comply with regulations based on it. U.S. automakers have embraced efforts to transition to electric vehicles, though some said the Biden administration's goals to slash vehicle emissions were too ambitious. It also could result in legal and regulatory challenges as environmental groups and others fight the proposal in court, leaving companies governed by the rule in limbo.



EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin PHOTO:
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The proposal to rescind the finding will have to go through a lengthy comment period, overseen by the EPA, and almost certainly will be challenged in court by environmental groups in a process that could take several years.

“We will certainly fight it,” said David Doniger, senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

A central issue in any court challenge will be the science about the harmful effects of climate change. The 10 hottest years in the global average temperature record have occurred since 2015, according to the NOAA.

“There is no sound basis in science or economics to disregard a warming world that imposes over a hundred billion dollars a year in losses on households, small businesses and shareholders,” said Jesse Keenan, an associate professor at Tulane University and one of the National Climate Assessment’s authors.

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Corrections & Amplifications

An Environmental Protection Agency proposal said U.S. temperatures peaked in the 1930s. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said the agency said global temperatures had peaked then. (Corrected on July 31)

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