

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the weakening of environmental law in the US and invites your thoughts on the subject.

The Trump administration has been using special laws under the coronavirus pandemic as an excuse to speed up its unprecedented assault on environmental legislation. Most recently, an executive order signed by the President will fast-track new freeways, power plants, pipelines and other major construction projects without rigorous environmental review.

Oil and gas pipelines, coal mines and other fossil fuel infrastructure, as well as large-scale logging operations, will also escape meaningful environmental analysis. No consideration will be given to the likely harm to wildlife, local communities, climate change or anything else that matters.

This isn't the first time Trump has put business first – tearing down any edifice of climate policy is linked with his campaign promise to “end the war on beautiful, clean coal”.

This time he's claiming that the economic impact of lockdown gives him authority to suspend environmental laws in order to kickstart the economy. But the only people it's going to benefit are those who profit from the destruction of the planet and, predictably, they ‘applaud’ the executive order. They get a free pass, while everyone and everything else suffers the consequences.

It's unclear whether the Trump administration really does have the legal authority for this latest executive order, and its legality is being hotly contested. Waivers enshrined in environmental laws were written for fast-moving emergencies such as Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill – not for economic slowdowns.

But the fact that the Oval Office is

using the pandemic as a reason is breathtaking. It's a staggering abuse of presidential power and nothing but an excuse to threaten decades of hard-earned, crucial protections for people and wildlife. And the stakes are frighteningly high and long-lasting.

The executive order instructs the secretaries of the Transportation Department, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of the Interior, the Defence Department and others to pursue emergency workarounds to waive long-standing environmental laws in order to expedite major construction projects. And that involves silencing environmental and public health concerns. It's one of the biggest and most audacious deregulatory actions of the Trump administration yet.

Federal agencies will be allowed to develop categories of ‘activities’ that require no environmental assessment at

“This executive order will fast-track new freeways, power plants, pipelines and other projects.”

all – and they would have no obligation to consider the impacts of construction projects on climate change.

In the process, it seriously weakens fundamental, long-standing conservation laws, such as the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act (once dubbed the ‘Magna Carta of environmental protection’). But American environmentalists are beyond surprise. Trump's long-standing and wide-ranging efforts to dismantle US environmental regulations predate the pandemic. He had been president for mere minutes when references to climate change disappeared from the White House website. Meanwhile, it has been almost impossible to keep up with the torrent of executive orders reversing age-old environmental programmes, damaging reviews of conservation plans and legislation, drastic budget cuts for critical scientific and environmental agencies and gagging orders and more, as years of hard-earned progress have been unravelled.

The government affairs director at the Center for Biological Diversity, an American environmental group, sums it up perfectly: “The Trump administration is turning back the clock to when rivers caught fire, our air was unbreathable and our most beloved wildlife was spiralling toward extinction.” It is blatantly obvious that it has nothing but utter contempt for both environmental protection and public health. ☒

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



The endangered black-footed ferret is just one US species with an uncertain future.