

Trump to announce scaling back of environmental reviews for infrastructure projects

President Trump is traveling on Wednesday to Georgia where he is expected to announce a new federal rule to speed up the environmental review process for proposed highways, gas pipelines, and other major infrastructure.

The rule, which he first teased in January, is expected to make it easier to meet some of the country's infrastructure needs but has been described by critics as the dismantling of a 50-year-old environmental protection law.

The White House chose Atlanta as the site for Trump's announcement in part because the new rule would expedite the environmental review for the I-75 lane expansion project, an aide said.

"The new regulations will modernize, simplify and accelerate the environmental review process necessary to build a wide range of projects in the United States, including roads, bridges, and highways," a White House official told Fox News.

Critics call the Republican president's efforts a cynical attempt to limit the public's ability to review, comment on and influence proposed projects under the National Environmental Policy Act, one of the country's bedrock environmental protection laws.

"This may be the single biggest giveaway to polluters in the past 40 years," said Brett Hartl, government affairs director at the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group that works to save endangered species.

Trump has made slashing government regulation a hallmark of his presidency and held it out as a way to boost jobs. But environmental groups say the regulatory rollbacks threaten public health and make it harder to curb global warming. With Congress and the administration divided over how to boost infrastructure investment, the president is relying on his deregulation push to demonstrate progress.

"The United States can't compete and prosper if a bureaucratic system holds us

back from building what we need,” Trump said when first announcing the sweeping rollback of National Environmental Policy Act rules.

The White House said the administration’s efforts will expedite the expansion of Interstate 75 near Atlanta, an important freight route where traffic can often slow to a crawl. The state will create two interstate lanes designed solely for commercial trucks. The state announced last fall, before the White House unveiled its proposed rule, that it was moving up the deadline for substantially completing the project to 2028.

Thousands of Americans on both sides of the new federal rule wrote to the Council on Environmental Quality to voice their opinions.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce cited a North Carolina bridge in its letter as an example of unreasonable delays, saying the bridge that connected Hatteras Island to Bodie Island took 25 years to complete, but only three years to build.

“The failure to secure timely approval for projects and land management decisions is also hampering economic growth,” the business group wrote.

The Natural Resources Defense Council said that when Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act 50 years ago, it did so with the understanding that environmental well-being is compatible with economic well-being. The proposed rule, it said, would lead federal agencies to make decisions with significant environmental impacts without ever considering those impacts in advance.

“At the end of the day, it would lead to a poor decision, increased litigation, and less transparency,” said Sharon Buccino, a senior director at the environmental group.

Georgia is also expected to be a key swing state in November’s general election. While Trump won the Republican-leaning state by 5 percentage points in 2016, some current polls show him trailing former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee, in the run-up to November’s election.

Trump is likely to use at least part of his time in Atlanta to continue his ramped up attacks on Biden.

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On Tuesday, the president veered off script when announcing new legislation against China to bash Biden for his policy proposals on immigration, criminal justice reform, and climate change among other issues.

“Biden has gone radical left,” Trump said in the Rose Garden as he maligned the proposals laid out by the Biden campaign over the last week. “There’s never been a time when two candidates were so different.”

The Biden campaign later fired back at Trump’s comments, saying: “Today’s statement that was ostensibly supposed to be about China, but there was one topic that President Trump couldn’t seem to get off his mind: Joe Biden, whose name the President invoked nearly 30 times. The whole sad affair says more about Donald Trump than he said about any particular topic.

“What we heard in the Rose Garden today wasn’t a president at all. It was a politician who sees his reelection slipping away from him and who is furious that his own botched response to the coronavirus pandemic has denied him the campaign events he so craves.”

Biden on Tuesday introduced his own infrastructure plan – putting a heavy emphasis on improving energy efficiency in buildings and housing as well as promoting conservation efforts in the agriculture industry. In the plan, Biden pledges to spend \$2 trillion over four years to promote his energy proposals.

Fox News’ Blake Burman and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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