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PRESS RELEASE

EPA Endangers Public Health During Global Pandemic by Relaxing Enforcement of Pollution Rules, Groups Say

EPA relies on companies to “act responsibly,” allowing for unchecked pollution, critics argue

Billings, Mont. -- A Western landowners and conservation group bitterly criticized the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) after it announced a [policy](#) yesterday that would relax enforcement of pollution rules during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. EPA said it will not seek fines or take other action against regulated companies that fail to monitor and report releases of hazardous air and water pollution while the policy is in effect.

The EPA policy directs companies to “make every effort to comply” with their legal obligations to monitor and report pollution and to train staff to comply with the law, but states that EPA will not generally “seek penalties for violations of routine compliance monitoring, integrity testing, sampling, laboratory analysis, training, and reporting or certification obligations in situations where the EPA agrees that COVID-19 was the cause of the noncompliance and the entity provides supporting documentation to the EPA upon request.” The policy outlines what

information and actions should be documented by companies that do not comply with their environmental obligations. Although EPA asserts the policy is temporary, the agency did not set a date for the policy to terminate. Upon termination, EPA does not expect companies to “catch-up” on missed monitoring for testing that occurs more than once per quarter, such as monthly water quality tests or hourly power plant emissions tests.

“The irony is that the agency Americans rely on to protect our health is responding to a health crisis by relaxing enforcement,” said **Bob LeResche**, board member of Powder River Basin Resource Council, who ranches near Clearmont, WY. “Perhaps the most troubling thing is that EPA’s policy anticipates ‘acute risk and an imminent threat to human health and the environment’ and ‘failure of air emission control or wastewater or waste treatment systems or other facility equipment’. These are sobering statements that remind us how much we rely on the EPA to protect our health, safety and environment. Their urging of polluters to just ‘make every effort to comply’ sends a very wrong message to the companies whose operations could put Americans at grave risk.”

“It is outrageous that this administration would use the cover of the COVID-19 crisis to dramatically weaken protections for human health and the environment. Indefinitely forgoing enforcement and compliance is putting the people of this country in harm’s way while we are already struggling to survive this pandemic,” said **Barbara Vasquez**, member of Western Colorado Alliance and Chair of WORC’s Oil and Gas Team from Cowdrey, CO. “EPA must rescind this waiver. We know all too well that we cannot rely on industries and power plants to self-report air and water pollution. EPA’s abdication of its duty puts additional pressure on States to inspect and enforce those rules, right as our state governments are stretched thin protecting human lives.”

“It is beyond disappointing that the EPA decided to use the COVID-19 crisis as an excuse to let polluters off the hook. In Indian Country, we rely on the enforcement of EPA standards to ensure we have clean air and water. Not enforcing EPA standards will hurt my people, especially those who are already vulnerable, such as children, the elderly, and those with

pre-existing conditions like asthma. I demand that the EPA continue to enforce its standards!" said **Lisa DeVille**, a Dakota Resource Council board member from Mandaree, ND and a member of EPA's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council.

"It is a shameful abdication of public trust that the Trump administration "hides under the blanket" of COVID-19 and thinks that no one will notice or care what they are doing. As a hydrogeologist who has worked closely with EPA for decades, I cannot accept that this broad-brush relaxation of the rules is necessary. Giving large polluters a free pass, especially at this critical time, is completely unacceptable. Shame on our government, again." said **Shannon Ansley**, an Idaho Organization of Resource Councils member from Pocatello, Idaho.

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The [Western Organization of Resource Councils \(WORC\)](#) is a network of eight grassroots organizations in seven Western states with 15,000 members, many of them ranchers and farmers committed to common-sense reform in agriculture, oil and gas development, coal mine reclamation, and rural economic development. Headquartered in Billings, Mont., WORC also has offices in Colorado and Washington, D.C.