News
EarthBeat
Man rides bike, with fire and windstorm in background

A man rides a bike with his dog in a backpack as the Palisades fire burns during a weather-driven windstorm on the west side of Los Angeles Jan. 7. Fueled by the wind, wildfires tore across the Los Angeles area with devastating force Jan. 8. (OSV News/Reuters/Ringo Chiu)



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Faith groups sharply denounced sweeping deregulation plans for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as "morally depraved" and prioritizing polluters over public health and nature. But they directed some of their most pointed criticism at EPA administrator Lee Zeldin's comments about "the climate change religion," which they said mocked religion and beliefs compelling them to act on behalf of creation.

Zeldin unveiled the Trump administration's blueprints for remaking EPA on March 12, outlining 31 regulations to eliminate or significantly scale back. Among those

targeted are rules to limit industrial and vehicle pollution as well as the bedrock policy giving EPA authority to regulate heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions that drive climate change. EPA has also moved to fire thousands of scientists and shutter environmental justice offices and other programs assisting communities most exposed to pollution.

"I pray that we take these issues out of the realm of political attitudes toward regulation, and focus on the lives lost to pollution," said Archbishop John Wester of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

"Pope Francis reminds us that 'realities are more important than ideas,' " he said in an email. "The reality is: many additional lives will be lost to increased soot pollution and other toxins."

> 'It's very clear that climate change is a scientific fact. There's no belief involved, and it's actually our faith that leads us to consider how we respond.'
> —Marianne Comfort
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Despite the EPA agenda's threat to public health, many faith groups are still determining how best to respond, and whether any intervention at the federal level can have an impact.

Carol Zinn, executive director of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, said that "the actions being taken in the reversal of policies in protection of our common home, Earth, stand in contradiction to the values we support and the work we have long done on behalf of God's people."

'Climate religion' backlash

Zeldin, a former congressman from Long Island, New York, described the agenda as the largest deregulatory action in the country's history. If enacted — a process that could take years and inevitably attract legal challenges — it would represent a major pivot in the mission of EPA, which since its establishment in 1970 by President Richard Nixon has focused on protecting human health and the environment.

In press releases and media appearances, Zeldin framed EPA's work less about protecting the environment and more on lowering costs and expanding fossil fuel production.

"Today is the greatest day of deregulation our nation has seen. We are driving a dagger straight into the heart of the climate change religion to drive down cost of living for American families, unleash American energy, bring auto jobs back to the U.S. and more," Zeldin said in a press release.

EPA did not respond to a request for comment for this story.

Demonstrators march across the Brooklyn Bridge.

Demonstrators march across the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City Sept. 20 to call for an end to the era of fossil fuels. (OSV News/Reuters/Shannon Stapleton)

The reference to "the climate change religion" drew rebuke from faith leaders.

"As a climate scientist and an evangelical Christian, it's best practice to avoid conflating science and religion," said the Rev. Jessica Moerman. She is president and CEO of the Evangelical Environmental Network and holds a Ph.D. in earth and atmospheric sciences.

"Scripture is clear on our obligations to steward God's creation and to defend human life, both born and unborn," she said.

Marianne Comfort, justice coordinator for Earth, anti-racism and women for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, called Zeldin's comment offensive.

"It's very clear that climate change is a scientific fact. There's no belief involved, and it's actually our faith that leads us to consider how we respond," she said.

Wester, who in 2023 was among Catholic leaders who met with Biden administration officials to support pollution limits, said that the idea of a "climate change religion" made little sense.

"The Bible teaches care for God's creation as a way of honoring God the Creator," the archbishop said. "If any public officials want to learn about these faith principles, there are plenty of faith leaders who would be willing to discuss."

Several suggested Zeldin read Old Testament passages about preserving creation, pointing to the books of Leviticus, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

> 'We've got to prepare, because if they are able to implement what they want to implement, what we see now is only going to get worse.'
> —Rev. Michael Malcom
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Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, founder of the Jewish climate group Dayenu, said in a statement that "I am not at all sure what 'climate-change religion' is, but I do know that Judaism, the religion Zeldin and I share, values the protection of life." The rabbi added that Zeldin's proposed actions were at odds with *pikuach nefesh*, the Jewish commandment to save a life.

"The real dagger here isn't piercing some imaginary 'climate change religion,'" said Avery Davis Lamb, executive director of Creation Justice Ministries. "It's striking at the heart of communities that rely on clean air and water. It's cutting through protections that keep children from breathing toxic fumes."

Asked about the climate religion comment during a March 13 press briefing, Philip Duffy, chief scientist at Spark Climate Solutions, said that the scientific evidence on climate change "is really overwhelming, and it's as simple as that. And it's gotten stronger every year."

Last year was the hottest year on record, and the warmest 10 years have all occurred in the past decade. Recent wildfires in Los Angeles and hurricanes and flooding in the South have reflected the types of conditions and storms scientists for decades have forecast would occur as the planet heats.

Duffy, who partnered with faith organizations in Boston while president of the Woodwell Climate Center, said "there are moral dimensions to climate change, and faith leaders are well equipped to address those and can be very effective messengers for proposing and supporting climate action."

Pollution and public health

Trump's blitz on environmental regulations has mainly targeted Biden-era rules, after Joe Biden worked to reverse more than 100 environmental regulations Trump rolled back in his first term.

Among the new targets:

- limits on power plant pollution, including emissions, mercury and air toxic standards;
- wastewater regulations for oil and gas companies;
- pollution standards on vehicles;
- pollution limits on particulate matter (PM 2.5), or soot;
- national emissions standards on hazardous air pollutants;
- the social cost of carbon;
- the "good neighbor plan" on industrial smog impacting downwind states.

Many of the rollbacks were suggested in Project 2025, the conservative blueprint for a second Trump administration. The blueprint included revoking EPA's 2009 "endangerment finding" that states greenhouse gas emissions are a danger to public health and welfare.

Long a target of conservatives and fossil fuel companies, the endangerment finding resulted from the U.S. Supreme Court's 2007 landmark ruling in *Massachusetts* vs. *EPA* that greenhouse gas emissions are air pollutants under the Clean Air Act.

power plant

A coal-fired power-plant is seen along the Ohio River in Moundsville, W.Va., in this 2017 file photo. (CNS/Reuters/Brian Snyder)

The endangerment finding underpins many of the other emissions and pollution limits the Trump administration is aiming to revoke, said Vicki Arroyo, an environmental law professor at Georgetown University and past executive director of the Georgetown Climate Center.

"They're targeting the pollution that comes out of power plants, out of vehicles, out of other manufacturing large facilities, and that is a prerequisite to really undermining our ability to address climate change in our country," she said.

Arroyo was the top policy official at EPA for the Biden administration, and she previously worked at the agency under both Democratic and Republication administrations. She called the Trump administration's attack on environmental regulations unprecedented.

"It's a broad-based assault on protection of human health and the environment, despite that is exactly what EPA should be spending the time protecting," Arroyo said.

Sixteen air pollution rules finalized by the Biden administration were estimated to save 200,000 lives and prevent 100 million asthma attacks through midcentury, according to a report from the Environmental Protection Network, an organization of former EPA staff. Total benefits of the rules added up to $250 billion in annual public health and climate benefits, the report found.

Pollution limits especially benefit infants and children, pregnant women, older populations and people with underlying health conditions, said Indu Spugnardi, senior director of community health and eldercare with Catholic Health Association.

Roughly 40% of Americans, or 131 million people, live in areas with unhealthy air, according to the American Lung Association. Communities of color are disproportionately exposed to poor air quality, which can lead to higher rates of asthma, pre-term or low-weight births, and developmental and neurological harms for infants and young children.

"All of us will be impacted by poor air quality and poor water quality," Spugnardi said. "But there are particular communities and populations that will be more impacted than others, so they'll pay the price in terms of their health, in rising medical bills."

rescue personnel working in a flooded area in Asheville, N.C.,

A drone view Sept. 29, 2024, shows rescue personnel working in a flooded area in Asheville, N.C., following the passing of Tropical Storm Helene. The storm made landfall Sept. 27 in Florida's Big Bend as a Category 4 hurricane and was downgraded to a tropical storm the next morning. (OSV News/Reuters/Marco Bello)

In a statement to EarthBeat, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said it was analyzing the implications of the proposed EPA actions.

USCCB supported many of the targeted regulations through public comments on mercury and air toxics standards, emissions from power plants and vehicles, soot pollution and methane emissions. They also endorsed Biden's reentry into the Paris Agreement on climate change, which Trump has again moved to exit, and opposed the first Trump administration's efforts to weaken the National Environmental Policy Act.

"A moral approach is to recognize every person deserves clean air and clean water and we should not accept that thousands of people have to die every year from pollution such as soot in our lungs," Wester said in an email. His archdiocese includes Bernalillo County, which received an "F" grade for soot and smog pollution in the latest "State of the Air" report by the American Lung Association.

The process for undoing and replacing EPA regulations can take two years to complete. Job cuts at EPA could slow the timeline even more, as could court challenges, which environmental groups have promised to raise.

The Supreme Court's recent overturn of the Chevron deference — which gave agencies latitude in interpreting laws they enforced — as well as past court rejections of challenges to the endangerment finding — could create additional barriers for the Trump administration, Arroyo said.

"I think the courts will take a hard look at how EPA is going to justify such a dramatic change from what has been found to be the case in terms of the science, the economics, what's a good policy alternative," she said.

Faith groups speak out

As the Trump administration prepares to slash regulations, faith groups are considering how to respond.

Some are calling on Congress to protect EPA and are preparing to submit comments during the rulemaking process. Noting that Republican lawmakers are in lockstep with the president, others question the effectiveness of federal advocacy.

More than anything, a loud and forceful faith voice is necessary, said the Rev. Fletcher Harper, an Episcopal priest and executive director of GreenFaith, who called the potential tidal wave of deregulation "evil" and "morally depraved."

"This is a moment where the future of millions of lives are at stake, and silence is just absolutely not an option," Harper said. "Religious communities need to be educated about this. They need to speak out."

Several faith groups working on environmental issues, including Dayenu and Catholic Climate Covenant, plan to shift attention to state and local levels where they see greater promise for progress.

"We shouldn't be silent. But we also need to be realistic and know how we can influence or what's our best role in this time," said Dan Misleh, executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant.

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Nearly two dozen Catholic organizations, including the Covenant, have planned a "Pilgrims of Hope for Creation" initiative for the fall. The events, while not political, will mark the Jubilee Year and the *Laudato Si*' 10-year anniversary with prayer and public witness to places and communities suffering from pollution and impacts of climate change.

Faith in Place, the Interfaith Power and Light affiliate for Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin, joined a lawsuit to unfreeze Inflation Reduction Act grants for clean energy and climate mitigation projects.

Far from Washington, D.C., debates, communities in the Gulf South continue to live with threats from forever chemicals, proposed pipelines and energy burdens, among others, said the Rev. Michael Malcom, executive director of The People's Justice Council and Alabama Interfaith Power and Light.

But what the Trump administration is proposing still stands out as unprecedented — and evil, he said. "We're in a place where just morally this ain't right. This isn't normal."

Malcolm, a United Church of Christ minister, said his time is best spent preparing not for political storms but real ones, and to support the communities already facing the impacts of climate change and pollution.

"We've got to prepare, because if they are able to implement what they want to implement, what we see now is only going to get worse," Malcom said.

Editor's Note: This story was updated with additional reaction.

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