

# NEPA rewrite divides the left

Kelsey Brugger, E&E News reporter Published: Thursday, January 9, 2020



President Trump this morning announced changes to National Environmental Policy Act rules. He was flanked by supporters, advocates and administration officials. White House/Flickr

President Trump's move to rewrite National Environmental Policy Act rules is resurfacing tensions between unions and hard-line progressives.

A new coalition called Unlock American Investment is evidence of the rift. The group is led by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to support the NEPA rule changes.

Workers, historically part of the Democratic coalition, are joining companies and trade groups in supporting the president's action. They stand opposite of progressives like Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) who say the proposal is "about giving polluters more political power and protecting them from public scrutiny."

Energy interests have long pointed out disagreements between labor and liberals. Frank Maisano, a principal at Bracewell LLP, a law firm representing energy companies, said the issue is playing out in the 2020 contests.

"When you look at 2020 and the election, that's where the dividing line is — it's not [entirely] between Republicans and Democrats," he said. "The progressive activists and the traditional working folks are kind of at odds."

Trump has highlighted the rift when delivering remarks in energy-producing swing states like Pennsylvania ([Energywire](#), April 16, 2019).

NEPA rules require the government to consider alternatives to major projects like oil pipelines, highways and bridges that can harm the environment and public health. They also allow communities to weigh in on federal decisions.

The coalition brings together more than 35 groups in the energy, labor and farming industries — including the Association of Oil Pipe Lines, North America's Building Trades Unions, the American Farm Bureau Federation and the American Wind Energy Association.

They all argue updating NEPA rules will streamline the federal permitting process and advance transportation and infrastructure projects.

The effort appears to be similar to one called the Pass USMCA Coalition, a business-oriented group formed to advocate for Trump's North American trade deal.

"We support NEPA's requirement for environmental reviews and public input," Chamber CEO Tom Donohue said in a statement. "But too often, the current rules are used as a tool to obstruct important projects, such as highways, bridges, public transit and even renewable energy projects."

Earlier this year, the Interior Department pumped the brakes on the Vineyard Wind project after it determined the environmental review was inadequate. NEPA reform advocates are pointing to that move in calling for change.

Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, a former oil and gas lobbyist who played a key role in updating NEPA rules, stalled the project until a cumulative impact study on the fisheries off the coast of the Northeast was completed ([Energywire](#), Oct. 17, 2019).

A key piece of the NEPA rule proposal that progressives have stressed involves the word "cumulative," or lack of it. The proposal released today simply states that an "analysis of cumulative effects is not required" ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 9).

*Reporter Timothy Cama contributed.*