

Flores: Trump rollback of two safeguards increases threat of chemical disaster in Virginia

David Flores is a policy analyst at the Center for Progressive Reform and a Roanoke resident.

Jan 1, 2020

The health and safety of Southside and Southwest Virginians are threatened by recent Trump administration policy moves that greatly weakened public safeguards against toxic coal ash and chemical disasters. Now, state officials must rise to our defense.

In November, the EPA finalized its action to gut a rule for certain hazardous chemical facilities regulated by the Clean Air Act's Risk Management Program. The rule was designed to minimize the threat of deadly chemical disasters in response to the West, Texas, fertilizer plant explosion that killed 15 workers in 2013.

Less than a week after the rollback, explosions at a chemical plant in Port Neches, Texas, blew doors off of hinges, shattered windows, and rained down debris on homes. The chemical fire burned for days, sending acrid smoke and thousands of pounds of poisonous and carcinogenic chemicals into the surrounding community. More than 50,000 residents were forced from their homes over the Thanksgiving holiday and into the following week. While residents have returned, questions remain about their exposure to the chemical fire and the possibility of residual contamination in their homes and schools.

Closer to home, the Radford Army Ammunition Plant (RAAP) — Virginia's single largest source of toxic pollution — would also have been required to improve its prevention of chemical disasters under the gutted federal rule. The facility is the subject of more than 20 enforcement actions by regulators over the last five years for long-standing violations of federal clean air, water, and hazardous substance laws, including, like the plant in Texas, ongoing "high-priority violations" of the Clean Air Act.

The current chemical safety rules for plants such as RAAP have not prevented chemical leaks beyond the fenceline or the fatal disasters that have occurred within it. A year ago, an explosion of military propellant killed one and gravely injured two other employees of BAE Systems, the contractor that operates the plant. While some safety rules and practices have improved, last

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year's death is only part of a terrible legacy of dozens of workers who have lost their lives in chemical and other occupational incidents at RAAP over decades.

Toxic coal ash comprises the second largest share of industrial waste nationwide. After years of inaction by federal regulators, state lawmakers boldly established state rules for dumping and containment of coal ash. However, the 2019 bill only addresses unlined coal ash pits at four Dominion facilities within the Chesapeake Bay drainage, leaving residents of Southside and Southwest Virginia unprotected from coal ash spills that contaminate our drinking water.

This means that Dominion and Appalachian Energy coal ash deposits in four locations on the Roanoke, New, and Clinch rivers are exempted from state requirements. Tens of thousands of miles of rivers, including parts of Virginia, have already been polluted by releases from unlined coal ash pits, contaminating fisheries and drinking water with arsenic, lead, mercury, chromium, and other toxins. Our rivers provide drinking water for millions, including residents in parts of Hampton Roads and citizens of neighboring states. Catastrophic coal ash spills have occurred in the Clinch and Roanoke basins in Tennessee and North Carolina. Virginians have been largely spared by those episodes, but the threat remains.

Even as the Trump administration rolls back worker and public safeguards against toxic substances and chemical disasters, the risks are growing because of increased flooding from intensified rainfall and hurricanes. Recently, the administration rejected key recommendations by the Government Accountability Office, which found that 60 percent of Superfund sites are exposed to flood and wildfire risks nationwide. A year ago, Hurricane Florence caused coal ash impoundments to fail in North Carolina, sending toxic contamination into the Cape Fear River. The year prior, flooding from Hurricane Harvey contributed to an explosion at another chemical plant in Texas, a Risk Management Program facility due for enhanced disaster prevention under the weakened rule. In a recent analysis of the James River basin, authors at the Center for Progressive Reform found nearly a fifth of such facilities are exposed to flood risks in communities that are among the most socially vulnerable to disaster nationwide. When a hurricane hits Virginia, the same catastrophe could befall our communities.

Given the dangers posed by the EPA's irresponsible rollbacks, state officials should stand up for all Virginians. They can do this in a variety of ways, from suing the Trump administration for the rollback of the coal ash and chemical disaster rules, to adopting state-based safeguards, to incorporating hazardous chemical reforms as part of Governor Northam's climate resilience agenda.

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