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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement Ranking Member Val Demings

Hearing on “Regulatory Reform Task Forces Check-In Part III”

November 29, 2017

Thank you Chairman Palmer and Chairman Farenthold for convening this hearing today. I'd also like to thank Ranking Member Plaskett for her friendship and leadership, and all our witnesses for participating today.

This is the third hearing our subcommittees have had on regulatory reform task forces, and I am pleased we have an opportunity to review the actions of three agencies which play an important role in ensuring clean water and air, promoting renewable energy, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

It is unfortunate that the agencies here today—the Environmental Protection Agency and Departments of the Interior and Energy—seem to be backing away from these responsibilities. Perhaps the laws passed by Congress and enforced by federal agencies to protect the public from dirty water and air, carcinogens, and radiation have lulled some of my colleagues into believing the siren songs of industrial polluters.

I think it is important for us—Members of Congress, agency officials, and the public at large—to remember the conditions that led a Republican President to create some of the very agencies before us today.

There are stories from across the country of smog so thick the morning sun could not be seen and rivers that changed color. Outside Tampa, Lake Thonotosassa had the largest fish kill in history—26 million—because it was so polluted by discharges from four food processing plants.

In my district, just a mile from the town of Zellwood, a 57-acre parcel of wetlands was used from 1963 to 1980 by a drum recycling company to store a deadly mix of chemicals, carcinogens, and fertilizers in unlined storage ponds – just a short walk from idyllic communities that developed after World War II. The contamination is still being monitored and remediated by federal, state, and local agencies.

Just as the men and women who served before us understood the importance of safe water, air, and land, we too must see the risk to future generations from climate change and act

now to avert catastrophe. Unfortunately, I fear that recent administration actions indicate an abdication of this responsibility.

EPA, for example, has proposed repealing the Clean Power Plan, which is the Obama administration's signature rulemaking that provides states flexibility to limit carbon-dioxide emissions. Without the Clean Power Plan, the United States will continue to release unsustainable levels of carbon-dioxide into the atmosphere. Not only will repealing the Clean Power Plan negatively impact climate change, repealing it without replacing it with another plan to limit carbon-dioxide will leave EPA in violation of the Clean Air Act.

EPA is not alone in proposing rulemakings which would negatively impact climate change. The Department of Energy has proposed a so-called Grid Resiliency Pricing Rule. Ostensibly to ensure that the power grid is resilient enough to meet demand and any disasters that might befall it, the rule is in fact a giveaway to fossil fuel-based power plants. By providing aid to power plants that maintain a 90-day on-site fuel supply, the proposed rule would grant a rate-payer subsidy to power plants which are not sustainable. That is to say, when you and I pay our electric bills, we would be giving upwards of billions of dollars annually to coal and nuclear plants. This plan would extend the life of unsustainable coal-fired plants, enabling them to continue to pollute the environment and contribute to global warming.

The Department of the Interior similarly has proposed climate change-worsening rules. The Bureau of Land Management within Interior has proposed delaying the Obama administration's Methane Waste Rules. These rules require oil and gas companies to submit plans to cut waste, measure and report gas flared from wells, and dispose of gas that reaches the surface during drilling. Not only is this prudent management of our public lands—Americans should get our money's worth for the natural resources below ground, and we should ensure that nature is not left spoiled from drilling—but it also worsens climate change. Leaked methane gas that is uncaptured serves no purpose but to harm the environment. In addition, Interior has begun taking steps to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling, which would harm the pristine wilderness while pumping greenhouse gas emitting fossil fuels.

The outcomes of the administration's actions are apparent and real, no matter how greatly some wish to deny the cause. Indeed, in Florida, we have seen sea level increases so steep that coastal communities like Miami Beach are investing billions to stay above water.

Our state and local governments are investing, not out of ideology, but in the interest of keeping their economies going, and I am disappointed that the Trump administration has taken this anti-environmental perspective with its rulemakings and other activities.

I am, however, grateful to the Chairmen for calling this hearing so we can further investigate the reasons behind administrative actions and the policy goals they serve, and provide comment and insight on how agencies can more effectively serve the American people.

I look forward to discussing this more with the witnesses, and I yield back my time.