

The Day

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Citizens, environmental group leaders and lawmakers gathered at the Legislative Office Building in Hartford on Tuesday, March 18, 2025 to advocate for a proposed state constitutional amendment to protect clean air, water, soil, ecosystems and the climate. (Theresa Sullivan Barger, Special to The Day)

'Downwind' Connecticut responds to threatened EPA rollbacks of clean air & water protections

[By Theresa Sullivan Barger, Special to The Day](#)

New London County received a failing grade from the American Lung Association for its ozone level in 2024, putting the health of the county's population of nearly 269,000 people at risk.

If the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) rolls back clean air and clean water regulations as announced on March 12, Connecticut's ability to protect the health and economic well-being of its residents will be impacted, state environmental and elected representatives said.

EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin announced the EPA plans to end the "Good Neighbor" provision which required the EPA and states to address air pollution that travels across states and affects downwind states' ability to limit air pollution and meet air quality standards. If the EPA allows power plants to pollute the air at higher levels, residents of Connecticut and other states in the Northeast will breathe dirtier air.

The proposed rollbacks are concerning for Connecticut and other "downwind" states because Connecticut relies on these federal protections to ensure upwind states take "responsibility for the air pollution that disproportionately impacts Connecticut residents and the air quality," said Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Commissioner Katie Dykes at a press conference this past week. "Connecticut already suffers from some of the worst environmental air quality in the eastern United States."

In addition to New London County, Fairfield, New Haven and Middlesex counties also received failing grades, from the 2024 American Lung Association's State of the Air report. Litchfield, Hartford and Tolland Counties received D grades; Windham County received a C. The air pollution in the form of soot and smog, or ozone pollution, comes, respectively, from motor vehicles driving on Connecticut's roads and from power plant emissions in several states, including Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, Texas and West Virginia. The grades, using data from the EPA, are based on how many days in the year ozone levels in each county exceed safe levels, with added weight given to days with greater air pollution levels.

More than 90% of ozone levels in southwest Connecticut and more than 80% of ozone levels in some remaining parts of the state result from pollution that originates in areas located out of Connecticut's jurisdiction and control, according to information on Attorney General William Tong's website.

Environmental groups and elected officials are working to prevent the threatened removal of EPA regulations impacting public health and the environment. At the same time state legislators and environmental groups are trying to pass state regulations to protect clean air, water, soil and ecosystems.

Threatened EPA deregulation

Zeldin announced the agency will roll back 31 environmental rules, including scientific evidence from National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) that human activities, primarily the burning of fossil fuels, warmed the Earth's surface and oceans, and impacted the Earth's climate. More than a century of scientific evidence has been central for U.S. action against climate change.

"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 prepared statement earlier this month.

The EPA will consider regulatory rollbacks on: power plants; the oil and gas industries; mercury and air toxic standards for coal-fired power plants; the mandatory greenhouse gas reporting program; and wastewater regulations for oil and gas development.

The Trump administration also has announced a 65% cut to the EPA's budget. In addition, the EPA plans to eliminate its scientific research office and more than 1,000 chemists, biologists, toxicologists and other scientists – 75% of its staff could be laid off, news outlets have reported. The scientists provide the scientific foundation for rules safeguarding human health and ecosystems from environmental pollutants.

So far, the Trump administration has threatened to remove regulations, but they cannot be erased with the sweep of a pen, said Roger Reynolds, senior legal director for Save the Sound, a nonprofit whose mission is to protect and improve the land, air and water of the Long Island Sound region using legal and scientific expertise.

“The good news is, not so fast. There's a complex system to pass and change environmental standards. It has to be done under the federal Environmental Procedures Act,” he said, and decisions have to be based on science, facts and public comment.

In 2007, Massachusetts sued the EPA, and the courts required the EPA to declare that greenhouse gases are an air pollutant which has to be regulated, he said. That decision was the basis for regulating power plants and tailpipe emissions.

Some of those regulations have not been implemented yet because they were challenged in the courts. “What this administration is going to do is not implement things that haven't been implemented,” Reynolds said. “It's harder to roll back something that's already been put into place.”

The environment is fundamentally cleaner today than in the 1970s, which is when these clean air and water regulations were passed, he said. There used to be smog and real bad air pollution, Reynolds said. The Naugatuck River used to turn distinct colors on different days, depending on what chemicals were dumped into it. Now it hosts trout fishing competitions, he said.

At the press conference last week, Gov. Ned Lamont said as a child, he wouldn't swim in Long Island Sound because the water was so dirty.

Regulations to boost clean air and water standards have improved quality of life and the economy, Reynolds said. Long Island Sound generates tens of billions of dollars toward the economy.

When the EPA revised its regulations in 2021 to reduce soot levels permitted from power plants, it projected the reduction in air pollution would produce public health and climate benefits valued, on average, at up to \$2.8 billion each year from 2021 to 2040.

Cutting the budget and reducing staff will result in fewer people to inspect and enforce compliance with clean air and clean water regulations, he said. “This is going to result in dirtier air and less swimmable and less drinkable water.”

Rolling back the “Good Neighbor” will degrade the state’s air quality, Dykes said, resulting in more trips to the emergency room, more days missed from school and work and increased health costs.

More than 10% of Connecticut’s residents have asthma, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More people are sickened with asthma in areas with dirtier air and fewer trees to clean the air, notably Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven.

“The EPA’s mission is to protect human health” and if the proposed regulatory roll backs go through, “people will be sicker,” said Ruth Canovi, advocacy director for the American Lung Association in Connecticut. “Connecticut has the worst air east of the Mississippi.”

How is Connecticut responding?

Environmental and health advocates are working behind the scenes to stop the threatened regulation rollbacks from going through, Reynolds said. If the Trump administration moves forward with its threats, Reynolds said, state attorneys general from Connecticut and states nationwide and environmental groups like Save the Sound will likely challenge the removal of regulations to protect clean air and water.

The Sierra Club has joined a suit fighting the National Parks cuts, said Samantha Dynowski, state director, Sierra Club Connecticut. “We’re ready to fight against bad decisions in the Trump administration the second time around,” she said.

“The pollution coming from neighboring states as well as pollution from within Connecticut will rise. We already have four out of our eight counties [including New London County] receiving an F from American Lung Association,” she said.

There are two proposed actions pending before the state legislature that environmental groups and some state legislators are supporting.

Senate Joint Resolution 36 seeks to enshrine the right to clean air, water and a healthy environment into the state Constitution. About 50 advocates visited the State Capitol in Hartford on Tuesday to lobby for a proposed environmental rights amendment. Chief Deputy Republican Leader Sen. Tony Hwang spoke in support of the measure, saying clean air and water protections put in place over the past 50 years are “not a partisan issue but an important humanitarian issue.”

Advocates for HB 5004 seek to protect the state's environment while providing for renewable energy development. Mystic resident Roger Kuhns, geologist and founder of SustainAudit, said he has been working to get the bill passed for four years.

When the federal government adopts policies to improve the cleanliness of air, water, soil and groundwater, he said, that "sparks innovation and job creation right here."

If pollution is in the atmosphere, that ends up in the soil and water. The pollution passes from the soil and water into the groundwater that feeds residential wells. "Once you pollute groundwater," Kuhns said, "it takes a long, long time to clean up."