DOI Secretarial Order Will Streamline Development on Public Lands

The Department of Interior (DOI) recently issued an order to help streamline infrastructure projects, allowing for increased industry development on public lands. Industry officials have argued that the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements have made it unnecessarily challenging for drilling projects to move forward in a timely manner, and the Trump Administration has responded with a Secretarial Order that will 'streamline' the NEPA process—increasing the likelihood of incomplete environmental review processes and cutting of corners.

'Strictlining NEPA'

Secretarial Order 3355, released and put into effect September 1, was responding to Executive Order 13807. The EO was intended to "Establish Discipline and Accountability in the Environmental Review and Permitting Process for Infrastructure"—essentially to make it easier for infrastructure development to proceed. The Secretarial Order drastically changes how the DOI and its agencies prepare environmental analyses and disclose their actions to the public under NEPA.

NEPA requires specific Environmental Assessments (EA) or Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) to be performed prior to infrastructure development projects. These environmental studies are mandated by federal law and are the principal way that agencies like the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service review proposed projects and gather citizen input. The Order describes these reviews as "needlessly complex" and suggests that they are "impediments to efficient and effective review." However, by putting a time and page limit on these reviews, DOI is encouraging hasty, possibly incomplete reviews, while also making it more difficult for the public to be a part of the conversation, as well as encouraging hasty and possibly incomplete reviews. Public input is a major aspect of the NEPA review process, but limiting the review to one year
will likely decrease the amount of time for public comment and allow projects move on to the next phase without thorough vetting.

**What Does This Mean for Mountain Communities?**

Mountain towns depend heavily on the public lands surrounding our communities. By making it easier for drilling and other development projects to move forward on public lands, the recreation that relies on these lands and sustains our economies, will suffer. Thorough EISs safeguard our environment by looking at the broad impact of development projects. A hasty and incomplete review process that encourages development may leave our public lands and ecosystems vulnerable to pollution and possibly even closure.

Leaving the public out of the conversation is not a good way to manage the public lands that support our economies and Western way of life. The Mountain Pact is following this issue and will keep you up to date on how it may impact your communities and the public lands that they rely on.

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