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Political Dispatch

From the Earth and Environment Task Force, PPC

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PERSPECTIVES

Under the Cover of COVID-19

This administration and its corporate allies are using everyone's deep concern with the COVID-19 Pandemic as a cover for a variety of actions damaging to the environment and public health, as well as further exacerbating the climate emergency.

The fossil fuel industry is facing challenges from diminished demand because Americans are staying home and using less gasoline, and because all the buildings the pandemic-shutdown emptied are not generating emissions. Recent news reports¹ show that in Europe and in the northeastern United States, emissions of nitrogen dioxide have markedly diminished from March 2019 to March 2020 (by as much as 45 to 50% in Paris and similar cities) due largely to coronavirus closures. (Ironically, nitrogen dioxide pollution leads to or exacerbates respiratory illnesses such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder.)

The fossil fuel industry is contending with larger market forces that are lowering the cost of renewable sources of energy, and actions by environmental groups, local and regional governments, and entrepreneurs to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. Fracked gas, a much cheaper fuel than coal, was enjoying boom times from the 1990s until recently because hydraulic fracturing (fracking) was widely used to extract huge quantities of gas. Renewables are now becoming cost competitive with gas. Now that the world is combating a terrible disease that principally attacks the lungs, it makes even less sense to return to burning fossil fuels that produce lung-damaging emissions of nitrogen dioxide and other pollutants.

But under the radar, the administration and its corporate allies are busy making moves to advantage using fossil fuels: 1) the EPA is rolling back Obama administration limits on methane pollution from fracking sites; 2) the White House is loosening fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks in favor of gas guzzlers; 3) the EPA has declared that the regulations limiting emissions of toxic mercury from coal-fired power plants are not "appropriate and necessary,"² which will allow these limits to be open to court challenges; 4) relaxation of more than 100 other EPA safety and oversight regulations, such as those governing coal ash deposits, prone to leak heavy metals like arsenic, lead, and mercury into our water supplies; 5) an EPA proposal to greatly restrict use of scientific information that can be used in EPA decisions, forcing agency experts to ignore some of the best evidence on how pollution makes people sick. The public comment period for this foolish proposal ends on May 18, when the nation is still in the midst of coping with COVID-19.³

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Fracked gas “has become an important feedstock for the chemical, pesticide, and plastics-manufacturing industries.”⁴ To sustain its production, the industry is repelling moves to reduce use of toxic agricultural chemicals, for example, the carcinogen glyphosate, other widely used toxic chemicals, and single-use plastics that clog the environment. Some states and cities that charge fees for use of plastic bags are seeing industry pressure to eliminate the fees.

As our country struggles to fight this dangerous virus, the administration and its allies in Congress and industry are using the crisis as cover to undermine our public health with increased air pollution—a complete outrage in the face of a disease that attacks the respiratory system—added carcinogens and neurotoxins in water and soil, and even more plastic pile-up in the oceans and on land. This is an urgent call for all of us to vote out this disastrous presidency and all its enablers in elective office. It is a call to elect candidates who support a clean environment and continued serious action to decarbonize our economy.

1. Washington Post, April 15, 2020; NBC channel 4 report, April 16, 2020.

2. Washington Post, April 17, 2020.

3. Union of Concerned Scientists, April 15, 2020.

4. New England Journal of Medicine, January 9, 2020.